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Portase & Son
A Novel

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BORLASE & SON

By the same Author

THE MANDATE
A GUARDIAN OF THE POOR

BORLASE & SON

A NOVEL

BY

T. BARON RUSSELL



JOHN LANE
THE BODLEY HEAD
NEW YORK AND LONDON
MCMIII

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

IN a book entitled "A Guardian of the Poor" and published in 1897 at the sign of The Bodley Head by Mr. John Lane, several of the personages here re-introduced to the public made their first appearance and had their earlier adventures (or rather, annals) set down. There is, however, no connection between the two volumes. "Borlase & Son" is in no sense a sequel to "A Guardian of the Poor," and those who are kind enough to understand the present work at all, will understand it just as well without as with a reference to the earlier volume.

It is hardly necessary to say—and the author would not venture to say it, had not some readers of "A Guardian of the Poor" been good enough to identify to him, in correspondence, the supposed originals of Mr. Borlase and of Borlase & Company's emporium—that the personages represented in both books are purely fictitious. The conditions of life portrayed are, on the other hand, absolutely veracious; but no individual and no single establishment have been, even remotely, aimed at. If some crying evils have been pretty plainly hinted at, it is quite impersonally, and the author is fully aware

of the many instances in which these evils are, and always have been, absent from establishments otherwise of the same class as the one described in the earlier part of this book and in "A Guardian of the Poor." Had such conditions been universal, it would hardly have been interesting to write about them; the inculcation of social, and still less of business, morality being no part of a novelist's function.

HAMPTON-ON-THAMES

May, 1903

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BORLASE & SON

BORLASE & SON

CHAPTER I

MR. BORLASE

FROM a disadvantageous standpoint across the river, South London is probably considered as a single neighbourhood. Over here, we know better. Clapham, for a single example, would never thank you to confound its utmost Grove (we are fonder of groves than of streets) with neighbouring Battersea. It would shudder at hearing itself compared, even favourably, with Wandsworth. I have been told—so nicely rancorous are our topographical distinctions—that the postal boundary which follows the devious course of Camberwell New-road has a well-marked economic effect on the streets of either side, so that houses which just manage to write themselves “S. W.” fetch some pounds more a year than their fellows on the other side of the scientific frontier, which are frankly in the South-Eastern District. Neighbouring districts blend curiously, East Dulwich merging reluctantly into Peckham, and Peckham in its turn resisting to the last the encroachments of Camberwell, somewhere near the Hall where the Vestry, a far-reaching and rather benevolent

power, makes minor laws for all of us. Our water, though we try to forget the fact, is even supplied from Lambeth.

There is hereabout a well-defined region, having boundaries other than those of suburb and suburb set up by the local topographers. It is not Camberwell, for it does not begin until long past where the Atlas omnibuses turn round and go back toward Westminster. It is not Peckham, for Peckham extends far out to the right as you go southward, and in places begins absurdly to call itself East Dulwich. After the Walworth Road has turned sharply, rounding Camberwell Green, and the colony of tradesmen and commercial travellers who go to town by tramway-car has been entered, one reaches the lurking places of a community which looks to Rye Lane for its shopping. These were the houses of the constituents of Borlase & Company, in its day the most characteristic drapery shop of South Camberwell. Mr. Borlase (for the "Company" was purely fictitious) used to call it a Drapery Emporium, a very deep, very narrow shop, served by some fifty young men and "young ladies." All drapers' girls are called young ladies, irrespective of age. Borlase's long had the art to divine the Suburb's exact requirements. Its ribbons had all the gloss and some of the substance (a little differently formed) of the most seemly West End products. Its calicoes, if you did not shake them too vigorously, were as heavy as any in Town. Hats bought at this establishment and "trimmed"

(an announcement in the window used to promise), "free of charge," had sometimes the very shape and appearance of last season's London styles; these were felt to be almost wickedly modern. To go farther would have stirred our prejudice; we like to be stylish here, but we scorn "the extreme" of fashion. Shoddy (which is old cloth, torn up in a machine and re-spun) furnished us with dress fabrics absolutely indistinguishable through Borlase's plate-glass windows from the vicunas and cashmeres of the wicked West.

Thus Borlase and Company throve as was most proper. Mr. Borlase, once a clerk "in the wholesale," then a struggling shop-keeper behind his own counter, aided by his sallow, skinny and admiring wife, became a large employer of labour and a power in the land. He was Churchwarden, Vestryman, Guardian of the Poor, a strenuous and ardent withstander of the County Council's innovations, and the recipient of the Testimonial which hung, gilt-framed, in his drawing-room, praising his benevolent public spirit.

A stout, small man, showing in later life some signs that the privations of his youth had been avenged in the days of prosperity, he lived with, as he lived upon, his business, and saved money. His marriage had been childless, but one of the well-known benevolences alluded to in the Testimonial, had been the adoption of an orphan from the House of the Poor whom he helped officially to guard. He had no kinsmen with

whom he was on any terms, and recognising sagaciously that his money must, some day, be left behind, he chose rather to provide himself with an interest in its disposal, than desert it, to the advantage of strangers or unloved relatives. Stanton Borlase the boy was called, having received his mother's patronymic as a baptismal name (for Mr. Borlase, as became a Warden of the Church, was scrupulous in keeping that Church's ordinances), and as he grew there was a new satisfaction in the careful economies of the establishment. If the young men and young ladies of the shop fared scantily; if match-board-ing and restricted air-space multiplied unwholesome bedrooms, and so saved rent, Stanton, some day, would be the richer. Mrs. Borlase, who adored the boy with a childless woman's inevitable yearning, supplemented her husband's endeavours until the day when her death left him widowed, with a boy of fifteen completing what was called in his school prospectus a sound commercial education. He had been born a puny, bloodless creature: one rather wondered why he was born at all, and why encouraged to take the very considerable trouble of living. However, when he was old enough to be sent out of the Suburb (there is no blinking the fact that the Suburb is depressing), country air did wonders with him, and he shook off some part of his native debility. The study was always kinder to him than the cricket field, and he naturally liked it better, being also encouraged in this peculiarity by his guardian. Mr. Borlase had never played

any games himself and did not see the use of them to other people—an attitude not uncommon among the self-made.

For three years after Mrs. Borlase's sudden death, Stanton was kept from home. For his vacations, Mr. Borlase conducted him, with liberal supplies of good advice, to one seaside resort or another, and put him in charge of trustworthy people, above suspicion of encouraging youthful levity. The lad was over eighteen years old, weedy and narrow chested, but by way of being clever (and from the unhidden circumstances of his birth and destiny still more by way of being tactful) when, on a winter morning, he was brought by a cab, with his luggage, to the side door of the shop. Free at last of school, he had been prepared by letter to make an immediate entry into the actual business life for which his commercial colleges were supposed to have fitted him.

Mr. Borlase, who exercised in his proper person the responsible duties of shopwalker, had seen him drive up in the drizzling rain, but had not thought fit to leave the shop; so that it was in the full glare of publicity that they met and shook hands, not without a certain cordiality. The draper was, in his own way, attached to the boy. Little as he had been accustomed to regard Mrs. Borlase's opinions and tastes, he would have needed to be actually prejudiced against the child—which he certainly wasn't—in order not to gather some of her tenderness for the little waif. All the love, nearly, that the

mother he had lost could have lavished upon him, Stanton had received from the mother he had found. His origin was no secret from him; but he had been brought up to call Mrs. Borlase "Mother." Her husband he occasionally called "Father" but more often merely "Sir," which Mr. Borlase, from his almost stealthy excursions into fiction, had been led to regard as the more aristocratic usage. Other boys in the Suburb did not call their fathers "Sir," and when Stanton found it the most natural form of address, the draper was secretly gratified. He had a sort of pride in his boy; a sentiment which took the place of, or perhaps covered, the warmer one of affection. Certainly he meant to do well by him, and liked to have every one know it, just as he liked, now that Stanton, well-dressed, brisk, and not ill-looking, was home again, to have him walk confidently down the shop and shake hands, before the assistants and customers.

"Well! So you're home from College; eh!" he said, with a rapid glance at his hearers which embraced the effect of this expression. "And all right, by your looks?"

"Yes, thank you, sir: I'm very fit," said the lad. "I had your letter yesterday, and of course I expect to do whatever you wish. Dr. Humphrey told me in the evening that you had given notice for me last half, which I didn't know before. He sent his compliments to you, sir, and told me I might say that he thinks you will be gratified with his report next week."

"Well, well: that's very nice, that's very nice," said Mr. Borlase: "and I've got a place for you in my eye, here, for a little time at all events. When would you like to begin?"

"This minute if you wish, sir: I am ready whenever you say so." Stanton had anticipated the question and prepared the reply which he thought would best please his guardian.

"Very well said," replied the draper, looking round the shop again. "That's the spirit I should wish a son of mine—an adopted son, that is—to show. The sooner the better, eh? Well, we won't be in a hurry. You can take a look round, and then go up to get your things unpacked. We'll have a chat at lunch time." So saying, he turned to speak to a customer. "Stockings, ma'am? On the right, if you please. Miss Miller—? stockings. Good morning, Mrs. Wilson: pleased to see you about again: hope you're better" (to another customer). "Have you everything you require? Yes? Thank you very much. My son? Yes, ma'am—at least my adopted son; just home from college. Coming into the business? Yes, ma'am; to begin at the bottom rung of the ladder, the same as I had to do myself; good morning, thank you,"—and so forth, to various callers.

The shop around which Stanton Borlase was meanwhile taking a look, was a large one, but not roomy for the amount of business which it accommodated. The counters ran endways to the street, and no contrivance was absent by which the space at disposal could be made the

most of; just as, by judicious arrangement, the labour of the young men and young "ladies" was carefully utilised to the utmost, that none might idle unreprieved. Just now the place was not very full of customers, though more people were in the shop than would normally have been there on a wet morning; for Christmas was at hand and trade already waking up in complimentary anticipation of that season. The damp umbrellas of the visitors gave the air a sticky humidness: the plate-glass doors, constantly being left open, to be closed after a short interval by an exasperated assistant, had a mist on them: and the goods displayed in the show windows had had to be moved back a little, early in the day, to avoid injury by condensed moisture rolling down inside the glass. Every available space displayed cheap finery and such things as ribbons, cards of celluloid and vegetable-ivory buttons, the vast class of miscellaneous ware known as "fancy goods" or "novelties" and supposed to be saleable at festive seasons. In one corner, greatly in the way of the neighbouring assistants, was a new, full-sized figure, dressed in a black skirt of economical silk and a brilliantly coloured blouse. Its scandalously golden hair, its black, well-pencilled eyebrows, the artifice of its too rosy cheeks, and its very scarlet lips, gave it an air of grotesque immorality; but the Suburb admires in art what it would rightly condemn in life. From the gas brackets over the counters, shaped like inverted Ts, hung machine-lace collarettes, neck-and-

wrist-pieces of disguised rabbit skin, and similar articles of taste and fashion. The assistants who were not actually "serving," were all busily employed in sorting out stock, re-arranging boxes of hat-trimmings, putting straight various rolls of cloth or calico that had been disturbed for the choice of purchasers, and otherwise repairing the hourly disarrangement of affairs which must in any event be put right before any one could leave the shop at bed-time. Near the door, a servant-girl was demanding "half a yard of narrow, black elawstic," and between whiles shaking a querulous child that insisted on climbing up to sit on a counter-chair, and observe the process of measuring the elastic by a brass rule let into the scratched and dull mahogany. A little farther on, a sallow woman with a hacking cough was asking for a yard and an eighth of brown fur trimming, and debating with an assistant the sufficiency of this quantity to make a collar and a pair of cuffs to go on a green cloth jacket. "Why not 'ave one of our sable collar-ettes, one and eleven-three, miss?" proposed the shop-girl. "Oh, I don't want nothink so expensive as *that*" was the critical reply. The talk across all the counters was of this character.

Presently Stanton went upstairs, to be received by Mrs. Dobson, the nervous, hatchet-faced housekeeper, said by venomous assistants to be closer-fisted than even Borlase himself. She was a life-long institution, having been in the place more than twenty years. The first floor was Mr. Borlase's domestic haven, and con-

tained, in addition to Mr. Borlase's private apartments, the assistants' sitting-room: higher up, in a series of infinitesimal hutches, known rather sanguinely as bed-rooms, the "young ladies" slept, two in a hutch. The young men were lodged elsewhere, a grubby house in Denmark Street being devoted to their slumbers.

The bed-room to which Stanton ascended, with Mrs. Dobson at his elbow, adjoined his guardian's. The place even now had not lost for him the forlorn vacancy that had stilled and ensombred it during the few days of his home-staying, when he had been suddenly called to the funeral of his foster-mother—too late to see anything but her empty body. His own austere apartment seemed dark yet with the unforgotten absence of her kind hand. There remained in it much that was eloquent of her—the stiff muslin drapery, over blue, glazed calico, of the dressing-table, a "tidy" in pierced cardboard on the wall, with "S. B." and a border of pink silk needlework upon it. In a drawer presently opened, a white brush and comb case which in her day he had always found on his table, filled his eyes with lonely, reminiscent water. The very bed had not yet been "made" but lay, bolsterless, with a coverlet, inside out, stretched over head and foot rails.

"I'll get your towels, sir," Mrs. Dobson said, as she cast an eye round the apartment. "Do you want any hot water?"

"No, thanks," Stanton replied, going over to the washstand and lifting the empty ewer; "but

I should like some cold." He had not afore-time waited for such things.

"I'll get you some," Mrs. Dobson replied. With an air of granting a favour she took away the jug; it was while she was on this errand that he came upon the drawer and the brush and comb case. There are few of us who have not been saddened, at some moment, by this immanent and voiceless lack of a loved, wonted presence. Somehow the very air seemed to have grown colder and more cheerless since he left the shop a few minutes ago. He went to the open window and closed it. Mrs. Dobson came and presently left him alone with his cold water. It would have been more comfortable, he now reflected, to have accepted her offer of hot.

One o'clock found Mr. Borlase and Stanton facing each other across a tureen of soup, a steak and a bottle of brown sherry, Mr. Borlase's favourite beverage. Stanton took water, sherry disagreeing with him. A good apple tart followed, with Stilton and biscuits to wind up with; after which Mr. Borlase, lighting a cigar, led the way to the drawing-room of atrocious splendour, decorated with his own portrait in oils, a work of testimonial art modestly alluded to as "the accompanying" in the illuminated address which hung near it, and bore witness to the greatness of its original.

"Well, young man! And now for a talk," said the draper. "The sooner the better, as you said just now, though there's no occasion to rush things. Do you smoke yet? Don't own to it, I suppose, eh?"

"A cigarette sometimes, sir, if you don't see any harm in it," Staton admitted, blushing a little.

"H'm! better without it; but boys all seem to think themselves men, nowadays," said Mr. Borlase not unkindly. "Well, out with your cigarettes, then, and let's talk and get it over. I'll be bound to say you've got them about you."

Thus permitted, Stanton, still a little red in the face (his smoking having been hitherto surreptitious), brought out a paper packet of cigarettes, and lit one. His patron went on talking.

"You know the shop a bit," he said. "Seen something of it all your life, though I've thought proper to keep you away lately, until the time came for putting you inside it. It's a big business, Stanton; none better in the Suburb, though I say so. I want you to know it, and be proud of it. It's brought you up and kept you—lucky for you, too. You'd have been bad enough off if I hadn't taken you over. I've treated you as my own son: I mean to go on treating you the same, if you show yourself worth it. If not—well, back where you came from; you know that, too."

"You have always told me so, sir; and I have tried to remember it."

"You have remembered it, and well enough, too, for that matter, up to now," said the draper, eyeing the tip of his cigar, and stretching his feet to the fender—for the day was cold enough to make the fire pleasant. "Go on as you've begun," he continued with comfortable good

humour, "and you get what *I'd* have given my eyes to have at your age: that is, a good berth to step into, and prospects. In my day I had no prospects: I had to make my own. Yours are ready made for you, but I expect you to show yourself deserving of 'em, and meantime, you're to begin as I began—down at the foot. Are you ready to sweep the shop out at six o'clock to-morrow morning?"

Stanton hesitated a moment, his guardian eyeing him keenly, sidelong. "I didn't exactly . . ." the boy began; then he checked himself, his mere dependency—never long lost sight of when he was at home—recalled with new force. "Yes, sir," he said at length. "Whatever you set me to."

"That's right, that's right," said Mr. Borlase approvingly. "That's the spirit, and I don't know but that it would be best for you if I took you at your word. But, bearing my name, I don't choose that you should be put to that; not here, at all events. Besides, I don't mean to keep you in the shop as a permanent thing. I'll make a place for you for a time; after that I've other plans. For the present . . . You've been taught book-keeping, I suppose, by the way?"

"Yes, sir."

"Think you know it all, I suppose—eh?"

"I took the head of my class, sir."

"H'm! pretty book-keeping it is, I expect. However, that's what you are to do. Wicksted's the book-keeper at present: he's been

with me a good while—earns good money. It's him paints them fancy show-cards, you know—you noticed 'em?" There was a touch of proud anxiety in Mr. Borlase's question.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you'll sit beside him, and do what he tells you. I shall tell *him* what to tell you. You ain't supposed to be here to learn: you're here to help, and to earn your pay. You'll draw ten shillings a week; not that you'll be worth it, I expect, yet awhile, but it gives you a position. When you're worth more, you'll earn more. Wicksted gets his two pounds fifteen; so you see there's prospects already. We pay our people well, you know," Mr. Borlase added reflectively. He did not add that Wicksted, who was married, "lived out," thus saving his employer the cost of board and lodging. Probably the fact was in Mr. Borlase's mind, however, for he added: "About your grub. You'll live with me. You're none too fat, and a little feeding up will do you good. You'll take your old room."

"Thank you, sir," said Stanton again, obediently. (Mr. Borlase's manner was a continuous invitation to gratitude.) "I'm sure it's a very liberal arrangement." And to his boyish inexperience it appeared so. Mr. Borlase looked at his watch.

"Eh, eh? Three o'clock? I must get down stairs," he said. "Do what you like this afternoon. Go out—or I'll tell you what, get your books out and furbish up your book-keeping. You'll start to-morrow morning—that's the half

week, and you'll get half a week's pay on Saturday."

So saying, he went out, meeting Mrs. Dobson in the passage. "Ah, Housekeeper," he said, "by the way—that butter-man's bill mounts up rather." Mr. Borlase was no pedant to give margarine its scientific name.

"It do, sir," said the housekeeper, "though I try to keep it as low as I can, sir. But it's 'ard this cold weather to get the butter to spread, sir; and these late nights the young men eats a good deal of cheese."

"You'd better cut the cheese yourself in future, Housekeeper," said Mr. Borlase reflectively. "And about the butter, if it don't go so far this weather, I'll talk to Simpson about it, when I pay his bill on Saturday, and see whether we can't do it a little cheaper. We're being eaten out of house and home this way."

So saying he descended to the ground floor and entered the shop.

CHAPTER II

THE CUSTOMS OF TRADE

No form of arithmetical torment is more distasteful to the judicious schoolboy than the wantonly complicated exercise called "Bills of Parcels;" but Stanton did not murmur when his first task proved to be an exaggerated form of this puzzle, in the shape of a huge batch of wholesale invoices which he was bidden to "check."

He had been punctual at the breakfast table, and Mr. Borlase noted in an approving silence that he had substituted black cloth jacket and waistcoat, with dark trousers, for the suit of tweed he had come home in. The shopmen wore "tails," to which as yet Stanton only aspired; otherwise he was clothed much as they were. He felt presently rather glad that he had not yielded to ambition. For, to a raw lad, the eyes of something over a score even of shop "young ladies," presented some terrors, and he coloured under their scrutiny when his entrance was found to be regarded as the signal for the girls, suddenly hushed, to take their seats along one whole side of two long trestle-supported boards with which Mr. Borlase's cross-table formed a hugely elongated T. The young men sat oppo-

site them in equal silence. Conversation was not allowed after seats were taken, unless the brief remarks addressed by Mr. Borlase to the Deity before and after the meal could be thus intituled.

Each of the assistants had a thick earthenware plate and three slices of still thicker bread, "buttered" chiefly in the middle at this season of the year. A few large plates of surplus slices testified the unstinted freedom of the employés' appetites. Their tea was already steaming in cups, also thicker than a fastidious appetite might have preferred—but nothing, probably, can discourage a shop-assistant's thirst for tea. It was drunk in huge gulps, and with a hasty appreciation, now, and at dinner, and at tea-time; always rather hurriedly and always with a curious noisiness, "just like water running down a bath-waste," Stanton remarked to himself. The time allotted to refreshment had to be made the most of, like everything else at Borlase's, and it is difficult to drink hot tea quickly and silently too.

The draper lifted a plated dish-cover and helped Stanton to excellent bacon and poached eggs; a rack of dry toast stood at his elbow. He ate with a good appetite, but with some eagerness to get the meal over. As soon as the closing Grace served as an intimation for the assistants to shuffle out, he rose; but Mr. Borlase checked him, with a hand on his arm.

"Wait a bit," he said. "Wicksted!"

A tall, lean man of perhaps five and thirty,

who had just come in, not having breakfasted with the "hands," disengaged himself from his fellows. He now approached the Principal and stood awaiting orders. Mr. Borlase kept him still standing until the last young lady had gone out. Then he said:

"Wicksted" ("Mr." was only used in the presence of customers: it is one of the minor technicalities of trade that any drudge becomes "Mister" so-and-so, so long as the shop is open), "Wicksted—this is my adopted son, as you know: Mr. Stanton Borlase. He is now in the employ of the shop. You will put his name on the pay-roll as from this morning: twenty-six pounds a year. The place I told you to make in your desk is for him. He will help you with the books, for the present. Find out what he can do, and let him do it so as to help you all he can. He won't save you very much time the first few weeks. After that I will give you something to fill up on. Just take him on with you. He is in a rare hurry to begin."

Wicksted heard this exhortation standing and in silence. At the mention of his own name, Stanton rose, and put out his hand; but Mr. Borlase pulled him gently down again, and the comprehending Wicksted ignored the gesture. He was, Stanton presently found, rather better educated than his fellows, sullenly respectful to Mr. Borlase, diligent at his work—as indeed he needed to be in order to finish it in time—and at first little inclined to be talkative with anyone. There were one or two cheap volumes in his

drawer, one of which he carried away with him at night and brought back in the morning.

The enclosed desk—a sort of waterless aquarium in mahogany and plate glass—to which he now led the way, had a couple of stools in it, one of them obviously new. Wicksted put a wad of invoices before Stanton.

“You might begin by checking these, sir,” he said; and thereupon commenced his own work at the other end of the desk.

Stanton stumbled at the outset.

“What do you mean?” he asked, after reading and re-reading the engraved headings of one or two bills.

“Go over the calculations and additions,” Wicksted replied from afar, “and see that they are right. As you do them, tick each item; then initial each bill in the corner as you pass it.”

The sound commercial education had not included this technicality, and indeed Stanton was to find soon that it had extended to few of the things he was expected to know. He flushed a little and set to work, however. After poring over the first bill for half an hour (during which Wicksted was called away to receive some orders from the Principal) he found himself yet at a standstill. Mr. Borlase came in and peeped over his shoulder.

“Well, my boy, what’s the job?” he asked.

“Checking bills, sir.”

“How are you getting on?”

“Not very well, I’m afraid; I can’t make it out, quite,” said Stanton, blushing again. “I

was really waiting for Mr. Wicksted to come back and explain."

"What's the difficulty?" inquired Mr. Borlase, putting on his gold-rimmed spectacles, worn low on the nose, and looking down at the desk with a consequent depression of the eyes, which gave him an air of some severity. It was his pride to know every detail of the work.

"A hundred and three and three-eighths D. W. un-B. Cal., s. h. job, four and ninepence," Stanton read, stumbling over the abbreviations. "I make it twenty-four pounds eleven shillings and a farthing and a half; the account says two pound and elevenpence."

Mr. Borlase frowned. "A hundred and three and three-eight's double-width unbleached calico sheeting, job line, at four and nine the dozen," he translated. "Calico is bought by the dozen yards and sold by the yard: it is a four three-farthing line, which is always the same in the wholesale as in the retail. Four three-farthing calico carries no profit except the counting-house discount on the statement."

The bulk of this explanation only confused Stanton further by its superfluities; but he grasped the essential point. "I see," he said eagerly, "four and nine is the price of a dozen yards; I'll cast it out again." And he began to write figures on the back of the invoice.

"Don't scribble on the bill like that," said Mr. Borlase testily. "Take a bit of scrap paper. And there's no occasion to figure it all out again. It should be a twelfth of what you made it. Don't you see that?"

Stanton coloured yet again. "I beg pardon; I ought to have seen that," he said. "Yes," (after a moment) "it's quite right. Two pounds and elevenpence." He ticked the item and passed to the next, Mr. Borlase looking over his shoulder and making him horribly nervous, until a customer providentially passed near, and the draper bustled out to speak to her. Presently Wicksted came back. Stanton, with a vast amount of "rough" calculations on pieces of paper beside him, had struggled through two or three invoices by now. The noise of the shop distracted him and conversation across the near counters perpetually forced itself upon his understanding: he had yet to acquire the instinctive familiarity with figures which enables a trained book-keeper to calculate almost automatically and in silence, hearing and remembering any overlying words without being distracted by them.

"You're not getting on very fast, are you, sir?" Wicksted enquired good naturedly and with a glance that assured him of Mr. Borlase's convenient distance.

"No, I'm not, I must confess," said Stanton wearily. "I'm not used to figuring with a lot of talk all round me. And look here, you needn't 'sir' me. I'm here to learn, and you've forgotten more than I know—that's easy to see. Show me."

"Oh, you'll get into it," said Wicksted kindly responsive. "It's chiefly knack and the knowledge of the way some things are charged. Tell

me when you stick anywhere; it's better than trying to worry it out. And when your head gets worried, take a turn at docketting these things." He took down a fresh bundle of papers, and selecting the first, folded it inside out into a narrow oblong, glanced at the name engraved on it, and wrote on the back near the top,

"Schweitzer & Brunn. £8-18-4."

"Like so," he said. "That'll give your head a rest. When you have got clear a little, go back to your bills. I'll do some of 'em with you; you're not up to our fractions I can see. It's better to dodge 'em than to work 'em all out school-fashion." And he proceeded to dissect a complicated invoice, showing Stanton how to avoid the minuter fractions and so bring about a result with relatively few figures, which the stricter academic method had worked out to enormous denominators.

Meantime the shop was filling. As Christmas approached, every day would bring an increase of business, and all the more festive articles of Borlase & Company's stock already experienced a large demand. By lunch time Stanton's head was spinning. His back ached, and his eyes were misty. Work, he was beginning already to find, was a very different thing from study; and the college, while it had taught him with magnificent accuracy how to write to Messieurs Smith, Jones & Company of Bordeaux that their esteemed favour advising draft

for one hundred guineas for so many casks of Médoc had been received, and their disposition would be duly honoured, had entirely failed to show him how a statement of account should be checked by its component invoices, or how to share a general discount in the various departments among which the different items had to be divided. But he stood sturdily to his guns, carried his difficulties to Wicksted, and (under the latter's guidance) began to make for himself a sort of ready reckoner for calculations which he found to recur often. At eight o'clock he had quite a little pile of verified invoices to his credit. It was even a little disappointing that he had nowhere caught "the wholesale" tripping.

"You don't think I shall have missed anything?" he inquired, with anxiety.

"Oh no; not if you've checked every item till you got it right. You see it's a thousand to one against their making the same mistake as you and besides these fellows are slick at it. They don't often go wrong."

He was standing with his hat on and book in hand, ready to go. It was what is called a "threepenny classic" in paper covers—a translation from La Motte Fouqué, dog-eared with frequent pocketting. Wicksted, the artist of Borlase & Company's window-cards, aspired to literature also.

"I'm off home. I don't live in the men's quarters in Denmark Street," he explained. "I'm married and live out, y' know."

Stanton hesitated. "If you care to wait until I get a hat, I'll walk a little way with you, if you like," he said timidly. "I'm muzzy with this thick air."

"All right. I'll wait for you outside," said the judicious Wicksted. "I shall be very glad of your company," he added, cordially enough.

So presently, not without a certain satisfaction at this opportunity of examining one another's disposition, they walked together down the street, a little crowded now, for the weather had improved, and the air was sharp and pleasant with frost. At least it seemed pleasant to Stanton. Wicksted shivered a little, and buttoned his thin overcoat closer over his chest, turning up the collar.

Stanton wore no overcoat, and did not feel the need of one. The hot shop, and the good dinner he had eaten with Mr. Borlase at the young men's tea-time, still warmed him. One's attitude towards the weather is after all largely a matter of nutrition, and Wicksted was none too well fed.

Presently they struck into Rye Lane, where a Salvation Army girl was endeavouring to keep together a shivering crowd. Opposite, battered gateways, wide open, offered consolation of another sort in the shape of a recreation ground, with neglected boat-swings on one side and a penny-gaff flaunting paraffin-oil flare-lamps at the end. Hard by, a bicycle shop attracted Stanton's eye.

"Do you ride?" he asked Wicksted.

"No. No time, no money, no inclination," said the latter. "You see I don't see too much of the wife anyhow; and with a little readin'—I go in for readin', rather—and the home to keep up, and something to be put by for a bad day, I've a pretty full use for my money."

"Got any children?" Stanton inquired.

"No, thank God!" said Wicksted heartily. "We'd have a struggle to live, the wife and I, if we had. As it is, we get along pretty nicely. Kids *eat* money!"

He spoke the sentiments of his class. Few shopmen marry at all, though many of them are "engaged" or "walk out with someone"—matrimony, dimly intended, never seeming very near. An object of legitimate ambition is "the wholesale," where a fortunate assistant may at times find employment that is more or less stable, and with good fortune, capable of yielding marrying wages—which means anything over two pounds a week. A childless marriage is considered fortunate—so short-sighted is love's young dream. Wicksted, as we have heard, received "good money"; but then he had talent, and had mounted to the summit of retail aspiration, the "books." He did not serve at the counters. His gift of ticket writing, moreover, as it enabled Mr. Borlase to save many pounds in the course of the year, doubtless contributed to his own emolument nearly the same number of shillings, being considered (as the draper frequently pointed out) in his wages. The young men of the counters seldom soared

above a pound a week, "in" (that is with their food and lodging provided), and indeed this amount was considered a prize. The young ladies earned much less, and were worse lodged in addition; but there are even more shop-girls in the labour market than counter-men, and Mr. Borlase could always choose from a score of applicants when a vacancy called for an advertisement in the religious press—the recognised medium.

Some of these facts were implied in conversation by Wicksted; and Stanton perceived that, as a beginner, he had been treated by his patron more liberally than an outsider could have hoped.

"Look here," said Wicksted, presently, as their talk began to lead them rather far down the High Street, "don't let me take you farther than you meant to come."

"No—that's all right," said Stanton. "So long" (he suggested) "as I'm not hindering you."

"Not at all," replied Wicksted. "I have a good way to go yet. A little farther on, you'll find the streets pretty full, though. But I expect you know this part, don't you?"

"I don't think I've ever been past the Green—not at night, anyhow," said Stanton.

"Oh, then you'd better keep on," replied his Mentor-for-the-nonce. "If you haven't seen Walworth at night, its worth seeing. 'Can't say I've much taste for it myself; but I daresay you might find it amusing, as you don't *have* to do it.

It's a sort of market, you know—all barrows and coster-mongers, and a good deal of chaff. Saturday night's the great time; but this week almost every night is a sort of half Saturday."

So they walked on. Passing Camberwell Green and working their way along the Walworth Road they presently found themselves, as Wicksted had said, in a kind of market. The shops, except such as sold provisions, were all closed, though some enterprising tradesmen kept the gas alight within, that their Christmas stock might secure a sort of advertisement; but barrow men and their wives, displaying along the kerb-line an incredible variety of merchandise, were driving considerable trade. The two young men made their way slowly through the crowd, Stanton greatly interested in the novel spectacle. A draper's shop—wider than Borlase's but in Wicksted's opinion not nearly so well stocked—presently arrested them. One large window was filled, in a curious taste, entirely with mourning—mourning of all degrees; from the deeply craped attire which seems to hint of an affliction quite inconsolable and represents locally the highest ideal of recent widowhood, down to the assuaged sorrow of half-mourning, with the white cuffs and neck-ribbons permitted to relicts of longer standing or of less retentive memory. The same strange appetite for the pomps of death showed itself in a flower-seller's barrow which stood in the gutter, displaying—for the accommodation of all tastes—huge wreaths of white flowers at one

end, and smaller artificial ones enclosed under glass at the other. A little farther on, an undertaker's window was filled with an improbable merchandise of hatchments. There also, likewise, Stanton observed a great array of model tombstones, calculated to meet all conceivable views in monumental uncomeliness.

The crowd was thick hereabout, jostling itself good-humouredly, and exchanging jokes with the barrow-men. Some of the shops appeared to be doing a good trade, and one was crowded to the very door. Its business was the sale of cooked meats of dreadful appearance. South London delights in greasy food: there was a brisk sale here for hot roast pork, for sausages swimming in liquefied fat, and doubtful-looking tomatoes, in the same medium, gradually cooking over gas. There seemed to be no limit to the demand for these dainties, for the pavement before the doors which led to them was crowded with waiting buyers, and Wicksted had to lead young Borlase across the road, dodging the tramcars, in order to get past it.

Stanton looked at his watch here, and perceived that it was time to turn back. So, at Camberwell Gate, where the Atlas omnibuses stop, they paused awhile, a little way down a side street, intending to part. But here, something which had occurred in the shop during the afternoon came to Stanton's mind, and he lingered to question Wicksted about it.

"What did the governor mean by that note he passed over—just after you came in from dinner?" he asked.

"Note? What note?" inquired Wicksted, taxing his memory.

"'Miss —' Somebody—I forget the name—'threepence.'" Stanton remembered.

"Oh—ah!" replied Wicksted. "Oh, that's a fine, you know. A mistake, or breaking some rule. In this case it was being late, after dinner. Haven't you seen the rules?"

"No; I never heard of them," said Stanton, apprehensively. "You'd better show them to me. The governor doesn't like it if one gets out of order."

Wicksted laughed. "Oh, they're mostly things that won't affect you," he said. "But I'll get you a copy. Every new hand receives one, and is expected to know all about the rules. If they don't know 'em, or don't keep to 'em, they get fined."

"Then did you have to go and make that girl pay threepence?" inquired Stanton, hoping fervently that this duty might not eventually devolve upon himself.

"No, no," laughed Wicksted, rather uneasily. "No. It's booked, you know."

"Do you mean that they don't really have to pay?"

"No. They have to pay, but it is stopped on Saturday, you know. I'll tell you about it to-morrow—" and on this promise they bade one another "good night," with a handshake which Stanton proffered and Wicksted did not this time decline. They had established a very cordial understanding.

Wicksted was a kindly soul, with vanity enough to keep him sweet, and sufficient self-respect to make him a pleasant work-fellow for a healthy-minded lad in Stanton Borlase's rather difficult position. He neither patronised nor toadied him, having indeed too much good sense for the one mistake, and too perfect an understanding of his employer's ways for the other. Stanton liked him well; and Wicksted was quite prepared to like Stanton.

Next morning, the drudgery of invoices recommenced; there had been some accumulation, as Wicksted's show-card artistry had been a good deal in demand latterly, with a provident eye to Christmas. He was now engaged, by command, on an adornment of large size, made up of several cardboards, and intended to decorate the whole width of the shop. "A merry Xmas to our Customers: peace on earth and goodwill towards men" was the legend ordained by Mr. Borlase. Some linen holly leaves, from stock, were neatly glued down by way of bordering, copiously interchanged with red sealing-wax berries; the wording was added in lamp-black mingled with gum, the initials illuminated in a style which disaccorded atrociously with the other ornaments, without in the least disturbing the artist's complacency.

In the middle of the afternoon, Stanton, after repeated calculations and "provings," brought a mistake to Wicksted. He had lost faith—after many mare's nests—in finding a real error: "the wholesale" appeared to be impeccable.

He looked only for the discovery of his own blunder.

"Look here, Mr. Wicksted," he said; "I can't make this agree anyhow. They make it five pounds eighteen. I make it six pounds eight."

"Eh, what?" asked Wicksted, leaving off in the middle of the initial X into which the first syllable of his "Christmas" was with such strange irreverence contracted. "Which way? Against themselves? It can't be! Let's see." He took Stanton's pencil and made the reckoning far more expeditiously than the latter had done. "Yes," he said, "you're right. They've done themselves for ten bob, right enough."

"What do you do in such a case?" Stanton asked.

"Do? You can't do anything," said Wicksted. "Let it slide. It won't make any balance in the books; we simply enter up the total."

He regarded the question as closed.

"But they've cheated themselves," Stanton objected.

"Yes, of course. That's their affair. We don't undertake to look after their interests," said Wicksted. "All we've got to do is to see that they don't overcharge *us*."

Stanton, turning red, said nothing. Wicksted coughed behind his hand. At one time the thing might have shown itself in some other light: but long usage at Borlase & Company's, and the constant audition of Mr. Borlase's business

maxims, had accustomed him to the practice of the house.

"Oh, we do hundreds of pounds with those people in the course of a year," he said. "They make enough out of us. Besides, it isn't business; we can't keep their books and our own as well. It isn't the custom of the trade. You'll find *that* everywhere. Let it slide. Of course if they make a mistake against us, it's our business to point it out: they'd never find it out and tell *us*. Stuff often measures out (for instance) a little over or a little short. If it's short, we claim it, and they always take our word; if it's over, it makes a little more trouble than a mere clerical error, because we have to note it in the stock book; otherwise that would be thrown out of balance. But this only makes the department ten shillings better off. Simply check it off, as if it was right. That's all. Your initials mean that the bill isn't over; that's all that is required," Wicksted concluded. "Look here, I must get on, or I shall never finish this bloomin' text in time for Christmas Eve."

Just then Mr. Borlase came into the enclosure. "Fines Book," he said in a voice too low to be heard outside in the shop; and then, as Wicksted handed him a long, narrow volume, bound in white parchment: "Miss West, passing a customer. That's the third time, I fancy, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Hope not," Wicksted muttered, still intent on X for "Christmas."

"Yes," said the draper, who had not heard him, being intent on the book. "Third time.

Had experience enough to know better too. Well—a week's notice, Saturday: don't tell her before; and of course a shilling fine. We can't have this sort of thing continually occurring: it's such a bad example. Put an ad. in the paper next week, W.: no use doing it now. It's a good job her notice extends over the busy time."

"What pay in the ad., sir? The same as Miss West—twelve shillings?" Wicksted inquired.

"Twelve shillings! No! What are you thinking of? She had a good deal too much. Seven shillings for a new young lady; one of the experienced hands must give an eye to Miss West's counter. How are you getting on with the text? Hum: 'Merry X—' and the rest sketched in. 'Peace on earth and goodwill:' I think I'd put a capital G for 'goodwill.' It begins to look shapeable. Here: enter this fine before you put the book away. I must go."

He had raised himself on the rail of Stanton's chair as he was speaking, to look into the shop, where a customer appeared to be complaining. Dropping to the floor, he hurried out. Stanton, who had paused in his work to listen, held out his hand for the book, which Wicksted, shutting it up on a piece of blotting paper, handed to him without speaking.

Stanton, looking down the list, found it only half comprehensible. There were numerous penal offences; as thus: "Late for breakfast (Rule 3)—sixpence; stock not tidy (Rule 22)—threepence; omitting to mark length on piece-goods (Rule 18)—sixpence; mistake in bill

(Rule 2)—threepence. Second time—sixpence ;” and so forth. Wicksted, questioned, pleaded curtly “custom of the trade,” without looking up from his text-painting. There were rules (he remarked) in all trades—and, by the way, Stanton would find the rules of Borlase & Co. pasted up inside the flap of the desk, if he liked to look.

As this desk was littered with papers, however, he did not avail himself at once of this permission. “What about Miss West?” he enquired. “Is she going to be sent away?”

Wicksted looked up cautiously and surveyed the shop. “Yes,” he said, “and more’s the pity: she was a good girl,” (he seemed to speak of the dismissed damsel as if she were dead, Stanton whimsically noted): “one of the best. She won’t get a berth very easily at her age. That’s her with the yellow face, selling trimmings. She was good-looking when I came here first—not so pretty as Edie was though (that’s my wife): but she had a good complexion and rather nice eyes. She’s got skinny since.”

“But what has she got the sack *for*?” Stanton enquired.

“She has got the sack for having three swops: and we shall get fined ourselves if we don’t stop jawing,” said Wicksted, who secretly hated Borlase and all his works, though he was not such a fool as to let Stanton see it.

“But what’s ‘the swop?’” inquired Stanton, plausibly, for the schoolboy’s appetite for surreptitious conversation was not dead in him. “I

can't avoid doing it, if I don't know what it is."

"You won't 'do' it" Wicksted explained, smiling at his colleague's eager inexperience. "'The swop' is letting a customer go without buying" he added. "Sometimes you haven't just what they ask for: sometimes they lose their tempers, damn 'em: sometimes they're in a hurry. The best plan is to call the governor, if you can't put them off with something different. If *he* can't pacify 'em, of course the thing doesn't go down to you: it isn't your swop then. Otherwise it is a bob fine, if the governor twigs it: and three in a month is the bag: now do, for goodness' sake, let me get on."

There was nothing unkindly in the dismissal of the subject: the two understood and had begun to like each other. Stanton resumed his work, and in the strain which it inflicted on his mind speedily forgot the matter they had been talking of. An ordinary and ordinarily healthy lad does not, at Stanton's age, envisage very closely any aspect of life with which he is not directly concerned. Youth, in fact, is highly selfish, not from indifference to other people's pains and misfortunes, but from sheer lack of imagination—just as a cat walks along a high wall without a qualm of giddiness, because it never occurs to a cat that a fall would be very unpleasant.

Wicksted, who was older, had plenty of imagination: he intensely pitied the poor drudges around him, himself a drudge only a little better off. He even supposed himself to detect a similar

compassion in his friend. But Stanton, as a fact, hardly realised, until, long afterwards it was directly pointed out to him, that this mean-spirited filching of threepences from under-paid girls was a squalid crime. He had not even enough experience to know what that worst (almost) of all disasters, "the sack," must have meant for Miss West: he did not know that it meant active privation and debt, at the best, if some stranger proved kind; or actual starvation if fortune should be wholly against her. He was certainly not callous, certainly not cruel or indifferent to suffering, when suffering actually showed him its face. But he was not even sorry—it had not occurred to him to be sorry—for the girl whose fate he had just learned, until he noticed, as the second party for tea made way for him on the stairs (he was just going up to his own dinner with Mr. Borlase) that this Miss West, who had formerly been "good-looking," was crying into her handkerchief. Then, he was very sorry for her indeed, and would have said so, if he had not been too shy: he was sorry, to see her crying, not because he had the least inkling of what she was really crying about.

Miss West had a cold it appeared, also: and perhaps that is why the eyes, once, according to Wicksted, "rather nice," had sunken in and become dull and brown-lidded. But that, after all, was common to many of Borlase and Company's young ladies—that and a grey sallowness of complexion, a flatness of the chest, and a curious undeveloped look. These things, Wick-

sted might have grimly opined, were no doubt a custom of the trade. There were many customs in Mr. Borlase's trade, and few of them, somehow, were altogether pleasant customs, as Stanton, in his degree, was beginning to ascertain.

CHAPTER III

ERRORS AND OMISSIONS

STANTON's sound commercial academy had, he continued to discover, omitted to teach many of the things he would now be glad to know. It had likewise failed to prepare him for the alleged commercial custom by which Wicksted accounted for his treatment of the undercharged invoice: school-taught book-keeping (one hears) has seldom much practical value. It was not by the sophisms he had offered to Stanton that Mr. Wicksted satisfied his own soul. In the days when he reflected on such matters at all, he had merely said to himself, in the manner justly despised by Felix Holt, that he was a husband and had his wife's bread to think of. And Stanton, who was not possessed of even that excuse, ought not to have accepted, as he appeared to do as a matter of course, a practice which imputed gross dishonesty to his patron.

But once, while he was yet at school, Stanton was accused, and very nearly convicted, of cheating in an examination. A suspicious community of errors on the part of his neighbour and himself had attracted attention: and the neighbour had so volubly protested his innocence, his absolute abhorrence of the offence

charged, his actual inability, from defect of vision, to "copy off Borlase," that the latter, as shamefaced and silent as if he had been really guilty, was actually set aside for considered chastisement next day.

Now, a schoolboy's honour is a very peculiar thing, and one not easy to be understood by the philosopher. It chanced that a boy who sate in the desk behind Stanton had observed the whole proceeding just now recounted. This observer knew very well, all the time, that Nupkins Minor was the culprit, and not Borlase. He said as much in the playground directly school was over: not (however) in Borlase's presence, for the latter had been locked up in lonely duress, that his intercourse might not contaminate Nupkins Minor and his other companions. Mark now the point of honour. Johnson, the detective genius who fiercely told the truth in the playground, would not, for his life, have denounced the traitor to the authorities: to do so would have been to "sneak." Better that the innocent should suffer stripes. But he had no compunction in assisting to twist the arm of Nupkins Minor as a preliminary measure, what time a swift messenger sped to the gymnasium to invite in council a senior boy of influence, and Nupkins Minor's big brother; that measures might if possible be concocted in relief of Borlase's wrongs.

"Well, if Borlase didn't fudge, why didn't he say so?" demanded Nupkins Major, with heat, on being informed throughly of the cause.

"It's all very well to say he didn't, but we've only Johnson's word for it, and my brother's word is as good as his any day of the week. What does Borlase say?"

"He doesn't say anything."

"Then he fudged. If he hadn't fudged wouldn't he have said so fast enough? And looky here, Johnson, I'll lick you if——"

A fourth-form boy interfered. "Borlase didn't need to copy off Nupkins Minor, Nupkins Major," he said. "Why, it's his best subject—French: and anyone knows Nupkins Minor is turned twice a week regularly for that. Anyone but a bloomin' examiner would *know* very well Borlase didn't need to fudge."

The senior boy, more impartial, intervened. "That's a fact" he said. "I know that old Humpy had Nupkins Minor 'in' last half over his French. Didn't he now, Nupkins Minor?"

Nupkins Minor, held fiercely at the wrists by indignant custodians, admitted the impeachment.

"Well, what did you go and copy off Borlase for?" demanded the culprit's brother, who began to have an uncomfortable consciousness of family responsibility.

"I never," said Nupkins Minor, sullenly aware of this sudden desertion by his own flesh.

"Well, then" demanded Lloyd, the other senior boy, "how do you account for making the same bulls as Borlase?"

Nupkins Minor had no explanation to offer.

"You might as well tell the truth," said Lloyd—clearly convinced of Nupkins's guilt. "Now you did fudge, didn't you?"

"Of course he done it: I see him," said Johnson, ungrammatical but triumphant.

"Shut up. Let the fellow speak for himself," said Nupkins the elder; but he had qualms that the family escutcheon was being smirched. "And if you're lying, Johnson, I'll lick you blind, mind you."

"I ain't" said Johnson with conviction. "And you won't lick me. It's him what's lying."

Nupkins Minor was in the toils. He hung his head, deserted by the effrontery which had served him in the class-room.

"If he didn't fudge, let's see him do the blooming translation again," a born jurist proposed.

"Did you fudge or didn't you?" repeated the relentless senior.

Nupkins Minor broke down and began to snivel. "You're all on to me," he declared.

"Did you fudge or didn't you?"

A pause. "I just caught sight of one answer——" he began.

"What did I tell you? I told you he done it," cried the accusing Johnson, in triumph. Nupkins Major hustled him inexcusably. "Don't hit a man when he's down," he said; and immediately afterwards betook himself to cuffing his younger brother's ears with vigour. "You dirty little cur," he remarked indignantly.

"Look here, Lloyd," said the top boy of the

class, hitherto silent. It was he who had sent for the older boys, he who (with a delicate inspiration) had moved the inclusion of Nupkins Major in the council. "Look here, Lloyd; we have got to know what to do about Borlase. We didn't send for you and Nupkins Major to give Nupkins Minor a licking. We want to know what's to be *done*."

Lloyd delicately perpended this question. The healthful system of partial self-government in vogue at public schools was not used at the Commercial Academy. Even senior boys were not in the councils of Dr. Humphrey, the head master. "You can't very well go to Humpy about it," said Lloyd reflectively. "I don't know, in a case like this, that I mightn't speak myself. What would be better," he suggested, suddenly inspired, and turning to his class-mate, "would be for Nupkins Major to go in. It's *his* brother."

The personage appealed to looked sullenly down. "What a little ass you must have been to do it," he said to his brother. "And, by the way, what an ultra-jackass Borlase must have been not to speak up for himself. If you'd both stuck out, there needn't have been any trouble at all. Humpy couldn't expel you both." (The point of honour will be noted again: the mere act of copying wasn't involved in it: that was an act of lawful warfare against authority. The mere difficulty was, to save the wronged Borlase without the nameless enormity of telling on a school-fellow.)

"I'll tell you what," said Lloyd at length. "Nupkins Minor will have to go in and sneak on himself. There's no other way out of it. And it's your business," he added, addressing the junior class, "to see that he does it."

Nupkins Major, relieved from the danger of having to officiate in person, briskly applauded the decision. "Yes: and what they'll give you is jam tarts and chocolate eclairs to what you'll get from me if you don't do it," he remarked to his brother, with a significance which the latter understood.

When Nupkins Minor therefore—under the persuasion of certain arts on which the feminine reader may consult a brother—had made his confession, first in private, and next morning to the assembled school; when, in consideration of the awakened conscience by which he was supposed to have been moved to this act of reparation he had been spared the high penalty of expulsion, and condignly swished in lieu thereof, the examining master put to Stanton the very question which Nupkins Major had first raised. "Why on earth couldn't you say you didn't copy?" he asked. And Stanton had still no answer.

"Little fool: why couldn't he speak up for himself," commented the triumphant Johnson. "I told you Nupkins done it."

This same reticence clung to Stanton when free of school. He could with reluctance speak out. He bought what he did not desire at shops, from a difficulty in persisting in an ex-

planation, half understood by the salesman, of what he *did* want. He would rather lose himself than ask his way in the street: only in the last resort of despair would he seek out a policeman (whom he deemed the only possible source of such information) to direct him. A native pride forbade him to ask the smallest favour of anyone: he would suffer a wrong, rather than insist upon his rights: his seat was always being taken in railway trains, his place encroached upon in a crowd. He did not lack physical courage: in time he picked up a certain moral courage too, in contact with the world; but at this time even a manifest duty could not decide him.

He said nothing of the deficient invoice to his guardian.

He was picking up knowledge every day, and every day seeing an aspect of the shop hitherto unknown to him.

The frost had held. The air was clear and bright outside, with a promise of snow in it. "We seem as though we might have a real Old-English Christmas for once," people kept saying to Mr. Borlase: and Mr. Borlase explained to Stanton over dinner that a heavy fall of snow just before Christmas, without the usual English thaw, was good for some scores of pounds in business for the establishment. "People will always spend more money in a frost than in a thaw," he said: and Wicksted confirmed this curious piece of information.

But for Stanton, unaccustomed to so much

confinement, Saturday before Christmas (Christmas Eve fell on the Monday, in that year) was a day of misery. From nine o'clock in the morning the shop gradually filled. Wicksted's text was still incomplete, and that artist had been allowed to use the meal-room that he might work upon it undisturbed, Stanton being set to receive money and give change—a task of which his unaccustomed fingers made rather bungling work. Once or twice one or other of the assistants saved him from a mistake. They one and all pointed these errors out, he was quick to observe, in the same way. That is to say, they glanced swiftly round the place to make sure that Mr. Borlase was not looking, and then passed back the money and bill to Stanton. Not one of them spoke. Stanton's boyish good looks, and his easy, unsnobbish manners, had given him friends all over the shop; nobody would willingly get him into trouble.

But he was painfully nervous all day. After lunch, Wicksted relieved him, and he was set to work by his guardian to walk the shop, open and close the door, and in the language of that worthy "to make himself agreeable to people"—work which his shyness made horribly distasteful.

Everyone at the counter was required, to-day, to please at least three, and perhaps four, customers at once. Despite the brisk cold out of doors, the shop had grown stuffy and unpleasant. By four o'clock, when the gas had been burning an hour, the place seemed to him un-

bearable. He was to learn that it could grow worse and yet be supported: and the uniform pallor and unwholesome looks of the men and girls began to be easily accounted for, even by that boy's mind of his. All the week the shop had been open later than usual. That was why supper, the meal whereat the too rapid disappearance of cheese had excited Mrs. Dobson's apprehensions, was allowed. Strolling into the assistants' dining-room one night, Stanton found that only the men, as a rule, took advantage of the concession. A chubby "improver"—a young girl, that is, from the country, who, in consideration of the opportunity afforded her of obtaining London experience, was permitted to serve Mr. Borlase *gratis*—assuaged an appetite not yet ruined by gas and ill-ventilated bedrooms: and sheer hunger forced one or two of the other young women to eat dry bread: only the robuster digestion of the improver ventured on cheese.

At no extremity of discomfort or oppression did any employé or employée dream of murmuring. Elsewhere, folks were better off; that was well known. But to risk unpaid idleness in the hope of bettering one's lot, was an expedient too perilous to be entertained: Borlase & Company's wages did not conduce to thrift, or to the accumulation of a nest-egg, and Mr. Borlase himself, resentful, omniscient, everywhere imminent, was dreaded, no less as an employer, than as one who could withdraw employment. Many of the assistants had endured his service

for years, and the longer they remained, the more uncomplainingly they accepted him. No detail of the business was too subtle for his apprehension, no act of anyone in the shop too furtive for him to detect. His rule was not merely of iron sternness, but of steely cunning. It is hardly possible to convey what dread this overpowering personality awakened in the hearts of its dependants. Even Stanton—indulged, for the dignity of his adoption, beyond his fellows—felt its oppression, now that he was fully entered in the employment of the House. Not alone the word, but the wordless, half-divined wish of Mr. Borlase was more than law. Even at the Vestry, and in his other public offices, Mr. Borlase ruled as by sheer terror. It is a fearful thing to contemplate, but for more than fifteen years it is doubtful if the man had ever been contradicted!

As Saturday night progressed, the shop grew damply hot. The gas which made all things look bright and cheery from outside, communicated a painful smell to the stagnant air. All the windows were dim with steam-drops. Stanton's eyes smarted and itched: his head swam a little, and he was more sleepy than he ever remembered to have been before: for use is required in order to tolerate so large a contamination of the atmosphere.

In spite of all the assistants could do, the place was growing untidy. Light goods, hanging from the gas brackets, and from wires stretched across the shop, were constantly being pulled

down by inquisitive customers. Most of the latter, with a general sense of Christmas-time in their minds, were fairly good-humoured, though here and there a testy matron would give trouble to a fagged assistant, grown stupid with excessive weariness. No one (least of all Mr. Borlase, whose face shone with perspiration and obsequiousness) seemed to notice that the girls at the many counters were almost dropping with fatigue. Stanton learned more of the places where stock was kept, during this night of stress and suffering, than he would have picked up in a month of careful examination. He constantly ran into the dim warehouse behind the shop, to bring out rolls of cloth or calico, and was glad to breathe, even for a moment, in air a little cooler and fresher. Once, coming swiftly round the door of this place early in the evening, he by chance ran briskly into the arms of the plump improver, and in boyish fun gave her arm a squeeze which made her giggle—a circumstance which (had he known it) was recounted and laughed over many times during Sunday, and increased his popularity.

“I’m sure young Mr. Borlase is a most affable young gentleman” was the comment.

At half-past eleven the front door was closed, and the last customers—mostly difficult to please—were one by one shown out by Stanton through a side entrance. By order of Mr. Borlase he wished each departing guest “The compliments of the season, ma’am.” The amount of stock which a lady of the Suburb is capable of

inspecting before she can make up her mind to a purchase, would do credit to the most fastidious West-End matron. But by degrees even the slowest people began to go reluctantly away. Mr. Borlase had for some time been busied in the mahogany enclosure, counting out the assistants' wages, with the fines book (rather full this week) propped up before him. The "peace and goodwill" text, in several parts, stood on end against the glass complete. The young men and young women disposed of their customers: the last of all was a lady who, to Stanton's certain knowledge, had been in the place an hour and a half. She was made happy at last by the fortunate selection of a magenta velveteen blouse of quite singular hideousness; but, dissatisfied with the gilt buttons upon it, had spent an hour on the choice of a new set. Imitation tortoise-shell, in celluloid, finally met her fancy.

Some of the assistants were already paid, and had gone to the meal-room. As Stanton finally closed the door and joined Wicksted and Mr. Borlase, he noticed Miss West, the girl who had been "swopped." She lingered near the round-topped hole, like a booking-office window, with its tiny mahogany desk, over which Wicksted was paying out money. Once she almost came up to it; then she turned away to let another girl precede her. She was very pale, and kept pulling one damp hand nervously through the other. She lingered till every one else had been paid, and Mr. Borlase had begun to place the

sections of the text end to end along the desk, in order to judge of the general effect. The last letters of "Merry Christmas" (which Mr. Borlase had at the last moment caused to be partly redrawn in order to spell the first word with an I, E—"Merrie") blocked up the window, and Wicksted had to stand up on the rail of his stool to pass the money over.

"Ten and nine; a shilling and threepence off in fines, Miss West," he said. "You remember the threepence? It was a mistake in the bill; first time, only threepence; and the shilling is, of course, that swop." He hesitated a moment, still holding the money, for which her hand was outstretched. Then, with a side look at Mr. Borlase—still occupied with "peace and goodwill"—he went on: "It's the third swop; er—I'm to give you a week's notice." The girl said nothing. She took the money and went straight upstairs.

Christmas Eve was an aggravated repetition of Saturday. Wicksted's handiwork, nailed to the wood casing of a girder which crossed the low ceiling of the shop, near the door, occupied nearly the whole width of the establishment. The local paper, in its "Christmas Shopping" article, commented on the geniality and good taste of this adornment, "so characteristic" (it remarked) "of the benevolent kindness of our premier merchant." Mr. Borlase liked to be called a merchant. He was a liberal and consistent advertiser.

To-night Stanton had been entrusted with an

easy place at one of the counters, under supervision. The "private mark" of the house had been explained to him—all goods being priced in letters instead of figures. The plan is to discover a word having ten letters all of which happen to be different, and use these letters instead of the nine integral numbers and the cipher, o. Borlase & Company's word was "Cumberland"—C standing for one, U for two, and so on. This not very abstruse mystery is further increased when a price has to be named audibly, by the use of the syllable "siz" to divide shillings from pence. Thus "B siz N-three" means four and ninepence three-farthings. Stanton had at first to run these letters over on his fingers in order to translate them. Early in the evening—he was selling bonnet trimmings—he blundered badly, and an opulent customer somehow failed to observe the error.

The lady had bought a considerable bunch of artificial daisies. They were irreproachable on the ground of illusion (justly deprecated by Mr. Ruskin as an artistic device), having black centres and pink petals. After endless vacillation a bunch priced at "C siz U three"—one and two pence three-farthings—was chosen. Stanton in making out the bill wrote "two and a penny three-farthings," and was duly paid.

The female mentor under whom he was working chanced to be comparatively disengaged.

"What did you charge Mrs. Grey for those d'isies?" she inquired in a low voice, as soon as that lady had departed.

"Two and a penny-three," Stanton replied.

"Wasn't it C siz U-three?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's one and two-three."

"Why, yes; of course. What a fool I am! Wonder if I can catch her up."

"Of course not; besides, she's satisfied."

"But that won't do. You knew her, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, I knew her—Mrs. Grey. She's a careless sort; lots o' money. Do her good."

"Know where she lives?"

"Yes. Barry Road. The big white house. Why?"

"Why, then it's all right. We can send a letter. I'll tell my father."

The girl sniffed. "I shouldn't advise you," she said. Then, to a customer who had just come in: "Heeliotrope ribbon, Miss? Yes."

But Stanton had already departed, that his courage, this time, might not cool. He went straight to Mr. Borlase, with a very red face, and told his story.

"More fool you," said the draper harshly. "Can't you tell one from two yet? I've spent enough to teach you arithmetic. Who did you say it was?"

"Mrs. Grey, Barry Road, I'm told."

"Oh, her! Well, she'll never twig it; we're elevenpence 'in.' And you're threepence out, by the way. Go and put it down in the fines book yourself. Don't make such a blunder again."

As his guardian said nothing of the rectifying of the mistake, Stanton said nothing either. It was his first serious confession, and the manner of its reception chilled him. He made many mistakes during the next few weeks; some were detected, more concealed; he had had his lesson on the disadvantage of self-incrimination. Sometimes his inexperience betrayed these attempts, and Mr. Borlase would comment caustically upon them at dinner; for his first kindness on the lad's return home was blunted.

But on this twenty-fourth of December he was good-humoured, and disposed to be kind.

"I want to give you a suit of 'tails,'" he said after dinner, when the pudding had been taken away. "You can go to my tailor on Thursday and order yourself a black morning coat and vest and a pair of trousers; something quiet; black, too, for choice; it's the most gentlemanly." Mr. Borlase's ideal of male fashion was that of a well-to-do undertaker. "And here," he added, pushing a couple of sovereigns over the table, "is something to put into the pocket of your new clothes." Stanton thanked him warmly, and the pair hurried back to the shop, now full and very gassy.

But all things, however unpleasant, draw to an end, and Christmas Eve did so likewise. The midnight chimes were sounding when the lights were finally turned out. Christmas morning had come.

As Mr. Borlase passed out of the shop he was stopped by a trembling girl. It was Miss West, "under notice."

"I 'ope you'll excuse my asking you, sir," she said, "but I wished to know—as it is Christmas—whether you wouldn't overlook my—my notice."

Mr. Borlase stared, aghast. Stanton, a few paces off, lingered to hear the conversation, and was sharply bidden to "go upstairs." When he was out of sight, Mr. Borlase answered the girl.

"Overlook it, Miss? What do you mean?"

"Would you allow me to stop on, sir?"

"Don't you know the rules by this time?" inquired the genial premier merchant, austere.

"Yes, sir. I know I'm in fault. But the first one—the first failure—was on the very first day of the month. And I haven't any 'people' now, you know, so that I can't go to anyone until I get a place."

The girl's neck-ribbon was of black crape.

"That's very well," said Mr. Borlase; "but you should have thought of that before, Miss."

"I really did what I could, sir. The thing the customer wanted——"

"I can't go into that," Mr. Borlase interrupted hastily, and with averted eyes. "If I break through rules for one person, I must do it for another. I must be fair to everyone; I try to be. Don't ask me," said Mr. Borlase, with a conscience-stirring intonation, "don't ask me to be unfair to your fellow-assistants. I should have thought you knew my principles by this time. You've been here long enough."

"Twelve years, sir," Miss West reminded him.

"Quite long enough to learn your business. You will be all the better for a change of work. Don't keep me up any longer, please. I've done with the subject. Rules are made to be kep' to. It is very late, and I'm tired."

He stepped back to look round the dark shop and assure himself that no gas was wasting. The girl slipped upstairs and past Stanton, who had listened at the landing. It occurred to him at the moment that probably Miss West was tired too.

On Wednesday afternoon a letter was quietly handed her by Wicksted, who had taken it from the postman. She was "serving," and after a puzzled glance at the envelope put it in her meagre bosom. The next girl asked laconically: "Advertising?"

Miss West shook her head. She did not speak.

The letter contained a twenty-shilling postal order with the intimation, in a boyish hand clumsily disguised, that this money was "from a well-wisher."

"The boy is kind of a brick," said Wicksted at home, with a grin, for the story soon made its way to his ears. "But it's a good thing the governor didn't tumble to it."

"The old beast!" was his wife's comment. Mrs. Wicksted had been a shop-girl at Borlase & Company's herself.

CHAPTER IV

A CHRISTMAS DINNER

THERE is a place in South London called, unofficially, Walworth. Behind a certain segment of the main road, so named, stand many streets of uniform houses, all ugly, all fairly clean, and all most encouragingly respectable. They now shelter, very often, two families, for when this part of Camberwell was built the average of prosperity in the Suburb was higher; Camberwell has been often deserted now for Peckham, where you may have a thin villa of six cupboard-like apartments and a bath-room for eight-and-twenty pounds a year. In addition to their one or two families, as the case may be, many houses in Walworth, moreover, contain a "lodger"; that is, a single man, generally a clerk (and a clerk, as the City can tell you, of quite a distinctive type) who lives alone, has breakfast and supper provided for him by the woman of the house, and consumes these repasts in a bed-sitting-room, high up.

The houses themselves are ugly and ignoble, their very adornments foolish and repellant. To passers-by, window ornaments of the sea-shell flower and waxen-gooseberry order give dreadful promise of the rooms within. Yet these houses, some of them, are the home of lives

which might put our cynicism to the blush. Sometimes in the most improbable, the most grotesque environments we might, if we were fortunate, know ourselves confronted by what even Walworth cannot always kill—Romance.

There was little enough of romance, it may be, but an abundance of kindness and good feeling in one of these dark houses on the Christmas morning which arrived for us so wearily at Borlase & Company's just now.

Mr. and Mrs. Wheble, having a numerous and home-staying family as contributories, occupied the whole of a twelve-roomed house in Arrow Street, save for a fair-sized apartment on the second floor, where there abode a lodger of some three years' standing. According to former custom, this lodger, Mr. Peters, had been bidden to the family turkey. He was a stout, pasty-skinned young man of perhaps seven and twenty, practically alone in the world, having lost his parents some two years ago. His brother, at one time an assistant at Borlase's, was also dead. Once "steady," he had fallen into evil ways, and contracted a bad habit of wishing to borrow money, which led Mr. Peters to change his lodgings. The latter, who was accustomed to hint that he had once been a bit of a dawg, seemed to have picked up, in some mysterious way, his brother's lost "steadiness." He had now been for some years in one situation, and earned a progressively increasing salary, of which, with a family characteristic of penuriousness, he took extremely good care.

Thus, for example, he might have spent Christmas, and the Christmas-box received overnight from his "firm," with some relatives of his dead mother, or with a prosperous brother who managed an ironmongery shop in Birmingham. But either alternative implied a journey by rail, and possibly presents. Mr. Peters preferred to accept the hospitality of his landlady's kitchen.

The turkey had been dismembered, the sausages duly shared, the Brussels-sprouts and crisp, brown potatoes duly eaten, and all washed down with an opulent variety of bottled ale, lemonade, and a variety of port described at the grocer's as "good family fruity." Mr. Peters drank port all through dinner. The pudding, blazing blue with ignited whiskey in the interest of the younger Whebles, had been succeeded by mince pies, and by almonds and raisins. Mr. Peters, drawn unwillingly into a public-house raffle by a fellow-clerk, had experienced good fortune, and in reciprocation of Mrs. Wheble's hospitality, had brought out a box of remarkable cigars, which had been passed to Mr. Wheble and the two oldest of his sons. The children had departed to play out of hearing, and eat oranges; the hostess and her daughter Prudence were removing the last of the plates to the adjacent scullery: for the meal, as usual with the Whebles, had been eaten in the kitchen, where Walworth families live except on Sundays and festivals such as Christmas or a funeral, and where they are always most comfortable. The four men, ignoring,

until the ladies should return, the suggestion that they should go into the parlour, sat with elbows on the table savouring Mr. Peters' cigars. Mr. Wheble, who had taken beer with his dinner, was now tasting the family fruity, and his sons were gossiping of business with the lodger.

"What I say is," said Harry Wheble, "that no matter where you are, you 'ave to put up with *something*. I don't enjoy having to work late; but you have to do it, in some places."

"Why?" demanded his brother, an aggressive youth, who worked in an industrial insurance office, known popularly as the "penny a weeker," where punctuality at both ends of the day was the rule. "Why? Your hours are from so and so to so and so: nine to six-thirty in your case, ten to six in mine. You're paid to work so many hours a week: if you work longer you ought to be paid more. I have my overtime, once in three years. I get paid. If I wasn't paid I wouldn't take it on."

"That's very well," said Harry. "That's the rule for you fellows: it isn't the rule for us fellows. A fellow has got to give and take. If I want a day off I can ask for it; if you want one it's stopped out of your screw. The thing is as broad as it is long; you have to give and take."

"More giving than taking in your case," said the other.

"Harry's quite right though," said the father. "A feller can't quarrel with his bread and butter; eh, Mr. Peters?"

"Certainly not," said the latter sagely, dropping the ash from his cigar into an empty tumbler.

"You're in a very decent firm, aren't you?" inquired Tom Wheble.

"One of the best," said Mr. Peters knowingly. "I know when I'm well off."

The unusual advantages of Mr. Peters's employment were a favored topic of conversation at these gatherings. He was careful to have it known, however, that his own merits accounted for the consideration he received.

"You see it's like this," he said, "with me. Of course old Schneider, our book-keeper, is a beast. Germans always are, in business. They're accustomed to be nigger-driven themselves, when they're down; and when they *are* down, they're as nice as pie. When they're up, they're the worst nigger-drivers themselves. W'en I first went to Douglas's I was afraid of old Schneider. 'My Gott, A'mighty Gott, Mr. Peters,' he used to say" (Peters mimicked approximately the broken English of his superior) "'my Gott, A'mighty Gott, what haf you peen doing all day?' And if I'd been doing a bit of a mike, I used to bustle and try to do a lot, and ten to one make a mistake somewhere. Then he'd tear round like a cat on hot bricks. Once or twice he threatened to tell the governor of me, and I used to get frightened, and work like a good 'un the next few days. But after a while I found he talked just the same to the other fellows, and nobody ever *did* seem to get

run in to the gov.; so I says to Thurlow one day, w'en he'd been getting an extra wiggling, 'Ain't you afraid he *will* run you in on the carpet one of these days?' I said. 'No fear,' says old Thurlow (he's a dry old stick: been in the firm twenty years, he says; before Schneider's time or anyone's). 'No fear,' he says, 'Mr. Schneider won't carpet no one. Know why? Because the governor wouldn't like it. The gov. hates to bully any one. If you notice, no matter what you do, he never says anything about it,' says Thurlow; 'he just points it out, and very likely makes an excuse for you himself before you can say a word about it. I've been here twenty years, man and boy,' Thurlow says, 'and I never had a harsh word from Mr. Douglas all the while.' "

"That's a deal to be able to say," commented Mr. Wheble.

"If true," said Tom, who appeared to hold a watching brief against employers in general.

"Think it *is* true?" asked Harry.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Peters, with discrimination. "You see, Thurlow has his one job: the order book. He sits in front of it all day, and I don't say but what he keeps it well: he paints and paints at the figures to make the job last out. 'It don't do to do too much,' he says to me one day. 'You only get other people into trouble, and don't help yourself.' That was when I was slippin'-in to something. Thurlow *can't* make a mistake if he tried to. Now *my* work is varied. I'd have to do this, that

and the other. If I didn't keep my eyes open I'd make ten bulls in a day, and everyone'd hear of it. Even if Thurlow *did* slip a figure, he'd be bound to find it out before the night."

"Why?" asked Tom, with professional interest.

"Why, because his extensions would show him, of course," said Peters. "But that isn't what I was talking about. After Thurlow told me that—I hadn't been there above six months—one day Schneider was a bit rottener than usual. A Saturday morning it was (he's always ten times more nervous on Saturday than any other day), and he fidgetted round me about half an hour. At last he says, 'I can see I won't be able to do any goot with you, Mr. Peters,' he says, 'until I've taken you in to the governor: and then you'll mos' likely get the sack.' Now no one ever gets the sack at our place—certainly not for a little mistake—so I said: 'All right, sir: if you aren't satisfied with me you'd better take me in.' Well, he just danced round the place. 'You are impertinent,' he says. 'No, I ain't,' I says. 'You are a goot writer, as regarts that is concerned'" (Mr. Peters resumed the German accent, which in his interest he had a little forgotten), "'putt if you doand too it der way I tell you, what is der use of your goot writink?' 'Well, tell the governor,' I says. 'I'd sooner you did it than make this fuss.' 'How dare you say I make a fuss!' he says, and then he danced round me for another half hour; and when two o'clock came I got

my money from Schneider, put on my hat and walked out, without saying hog, dog or devil." (Mr. Peters did not make it clear why Mr. Schneider should have anticipated any of these expressions.) "If you'll believe me," said Mr. Peters emphatically, rapping on the table with his knuckles, "if you'll believe me, when Monday morning came, Schneider was as nice as pie to me, and he hasn't threatened me with the governor since. That just shows what I say," he concluded, somewhat irrelevantly. "If the firm's a good firm, you needn't care for anyone."

The ending of this heroic episode had been heard by Prudence Wheble and her mother, from the doorway. At the opportunity now afforded the latter said:

"Well, father, now perhaps you'll take my advice and go upstairs." Mr. Wheble pushed back his chair, and emptied his glass of port before rising. Mr. Peters closed and picked up his cigar box. The two younger men followed him to the door: and the proposed adjournment was effected.

None of the Wheble apartments voiced their past and present prosperity more eloquently than the parlour. It had green repp curtains of a devastating tint, fringed with gimp. Matching the curtains, or approximating to them, the chairs and a double-ended sofa of plank walnut were similarly upholstered in green repp. Over the mantelpiece hung, high up, a pair of portraits: Mr. Wheble in a painful-looking collar,

Mrs. Wheble with a yet more agonising simper and a starched bib. One divined somehow that these works of art had been bought for a great price, in company with a dozen *cartes-de-visite*, which was indeed the case, and there are two of the *cartes* in the album I keep for my more esteemed friends, to prove it. The new gilt of the frame which enclosed the "hand-painted enlargements included" disaccorded violently with the older, but greatly superior, casing of a vast oval looking-glass beneath them. The mantelpiece was adorned with a pair of lustres—a sort of vase in an opaque substance like *blanc mange*, ornamented in gold, and here and there "cut" so deeply as to show portions of transparent glass. From the calyx-like top hung a sort of petticoat of cut-glass prisms, holding on by means of wires to a circle of rose-cut "drops": the whole very ingenious, probably expensive, and not without a certain old-time charm, reminiscent of one's great-aunts. These articles of luxury and taste occupied the extremes of the mantelpiece. Next them was a pair of pink-faced young ladies with white hair, protected by glass shades having a fillet of chenille, in the colour called locally "maroon," round the bases; midway stood a vast ormolu clock, likewise under a shade, ornamental rather than trustworthy, since by no persuasion could it be induced to go. In the window, on an unsteady table, stood another enormous shade covering a sort of Chinese temple having lace windows and a Cupid seated most discordantly on the top, the whole

well saved from Mr. and Mrs. Wheble's bride-cake. The bow of the blind archer had got broken off, in the course of his twenty years' existence, and lay, with a number of silver leaves, on the base-board, which had (like the shepherdesses) a ring of chenille. The oval centre-table was covered with red felt, having a printed design upon it; the family books lay in an ordained pattern round the edges—a morocco Bible, the "Pilgrim's Progress" (an unappreciated masterpiece, chiefly valued by the children on account of its illustrations), a volume of "Good Words" in pimply purple cloth, a huge leather-covered Prayer Book, "Jessica's First Prayer" in green and gold, with a chromolithograph let in, and so on. In the midst stood a cut-glass dish full of oranges, and another containing nuts. The iron nut-crackers were lying beside them, between the Bible and "Enquire Within"—a work of literature which I absurdly forgot to mention just now, though when I have found Mrs. Wheble momentarily invisible, it has often entertained me with directions how to cook a partridge, to enter a room and to clean kid gloves. The carpet had a design of interlaced ferns of a most fortunate indefiniteness, rendering an effect, usual with tapestry carpets, of having "run" in the wash; but there was a fearfully distinct hearthrug before the bright steel fender, representing a copious epergne of flowers and fruit flanked by peacocks and a heraldic-looking cat. Hardly anything in the place was, you will observe, cheaply pretentious. The

brass fire-irons (necessitating a steel poker, al-lusively called a "curate," to do the real work); the Utrecht drawing-room suites, and "art" decorations, of East Dulwich have often of-fended me more, while they have seldom formed the setting of more disinterested kindliness, or a more sterling honesty than the Wheble family boasted, or rather possessed with no inkling at all that in these qualities resided anything to boast of. For my part, it may be confessed at once, that I would rather sit by pretty Prudence Wheble and hear her pound through "The Bat-tle of Prague," or strum the trite arpeggios of "The Maiden's Prayer" on her tinkly old cabi-net piano, than listen to a showy "operatic fan-tasia" in self-conscious drawing-rooms farther south, whose tight-laced mistresses would have sniggered at her plump fingers and her honest red elbows.

"I like the smell of a cigar," said Mrs. Wheble, not in tolerance, but with obvious rel-ish. "A good cigar: nothink smells nicer."

"I fancy these smokes are not bad," said Peters, with a modest air of connoisseurship, as he looked at the lighted tip of the one he was smoking. "Not the best, of course. I don't hold with extravagance; but good enough."

"Cigars are very expensive, aren't they, father?" enquired Prudence.

"Lord, yes!" said Mr. Wheble. "Why, some breeds are fourpence or sixpence a time. There's lots of people in London smokes four-penny cigars all day long."

Mr. Peters smiled the smile of superior knowledge. "Plenty of 'em," he said, "and more too. Do you know what my governor pays for his cigars? Four pounds fifteen a hundred—close on a bob a time. If you bought 'em at the 'bacca shop, I reckon they *would* be a bob."

"They must be something very choice, I reckon," said Mrs. Wheble.

"I don't know," said Peters. "He left one on my desk one day, being called away as he was going to light it up, and forgot it. I let it lay there for a day or two, in case he should remember it. Then I took it home and smoked it. Of course it was rather classy: but for my part I've often smoked a threepenny that wasn't so much worse. And ninety-five bob a hundred—think of the price!"

"I call it almost sinful," said Mr. Wheble vaguely; "but there, your governor must have stacks of money, Mr. Peters."

"Thousands, literally," said Mr. Peters.

"There you are," said Tom, the discontented brother, who read *Reynolds'* religiously every Sunday. "These chaps make piles of oof out of us fellows, and what do they do with it? Spend it in ninepenny smokes, while we live in——"

"Squoller!" said Mr. Wheble, and everybody laughed (Tom's theories being a family jest of good and ancient standing). "Squoller," he repeated. "Look around you and what do you see? Squoller!" Everyone laughed again—

Tom included. "W'ile Peters's Gov. wollers in luxury and shilling smokes," concluded the father.

"What sort of a looking man is he?" inquired Prudence, with a girl's interest in that element of the question.

"Oh, he's good-looking," said Peters critically. "Handsome, I should call him. And dignified, fit to beat the band: looks a Dook, I always say. I was saying to Thurlow only the other day: 'There isn't a man in the House o' Lords to beat our governor for looks,' I said. 'No,' says Thurlow, 'nor for dignity either. I been here,' he says, 'twenty years,' he says, 'and never seen anyone take a liberty with him. You couldn't do it if you tried. He don't *need* to say to you, 'This isn't the cheese,' about anything. You know it for yourself, the moment he looks at you.' And I'll tell you another thing Thurlow said to me," Mr. Peters went on, looking round the table. "'If you've noticed,' he said, 'you can't tell the governor a banger. If you've made a mull of anything, no matter how good a yarn you may have made up to account for it, you go into the governor with it, and what happens? It all melts out of you. You *couldn't* tell him a lie. W'en you face that eye of his, it's the truth you've got to tell, and nothing else, and you couldn't do different.' That's what Thurlow says: and it's true, too," Mr. Peters asseverated.

"That's a man for you, eh, mother?" said Mr. Wheble. "Does you good to meet with a man like that nowadays."

"It does," said Mr. Peters, who experienced a sort of reflected glory, and wanted more of it. "And what I say is" (he paused to empty his wine glass, and his voice warmed with the family fruitiness of the beverage), "what I mean, it's a privilege to enjoy the confidence of a man like that."

"Aye, that it must be," said Mr. Wheble, nodding approvingly. "Ah, I should like to see him once."

"It isn't everyone that can do that," said Mr. Peters sagely. "Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender aren't a firm to stand behind a counter sellin' quires o' paper, you know." (Peters's employers were wholesale stationers.) "He sits in his room and takes orders for hundreds o' pounds' worth o' stuff by telegraph."

"Fancy!" said Prudence.

"I never saw him wrathful but once," continued Mr. Peters, "and then he wasn't not so much waxy: he was just *terrible*! There is no other word for it. It wasn't me, thank goodness. It was Lucraft. He'd forgotten something—something rather important, I should think. It was when I first went there, and I didn't rightly understand what it was. But, any'ow, Lucraft had tried to hide it up, and Mr. Douglas twigged it. He came out and asked about it: and just as Thurlow said the other day, Lucraft had nothing to do but tell the truth. 'And why wasn't I told of it at once?' the governor says (very quietly you know—no gas), 'instead of waiting for me to find it out? I don't think

my criticism is so severe,' he says, 'that anyone need be afraid to come to me and own to a mistake.' He didn't speak another word, but I tell you, there wasn't anyone in the place that didn't quake when he said it. It wasn't anything to do with me: *I* hadn't made any bull, nor Thurlow either; but I could see Thurlow, sitting with his eyes down on his book, looking as if he thought the lightning might hit *him* next. But half an hour afterwards Mr. Douglas called to Lucraft for something or other, and spoke just as usual: he didn't save it up for him a particle. But it taught me a lesson, I can tell you!"

The conversation broke up here, Mrs. Wheble passing oranges and nuts. Soon came tea—in the kitchen again—with one of the hostess's famous plum cakes (which are memorable eating; as I, who tell you, know), crumpets oozing golden butter, mixed biscuits, brown "parkins," crystallised fruits, and toasted buns; and with the miraculous appetites which Christmas somehow seems to bring with it, everyone began to eat afresh. The meal was one to increase a beholder's respect for the human stomach. The children, in particular, strove redoubtably, and had room still for almonds and raisins after tea, when the parlour table was cleared for cards, a diversion reprehended by the Whebles on ordinary occasions, but permitted always at Christmas-tide. The stakes were Barcelona nuts.

CHAPTER V

NEW YEAR'S EVE

ON New Year's Eve following these Christmas festivities, Mr. Peters and his fellow clerks at Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender's "stayed late" in a body. Mr. Schneider, the fussy German book-keeper, had adorned this proceeding. He was a ruddy-faced individual, with a huge, overhanging moustache, a disproportionate abdomen, and a leaf-shaped scar across his right cheek, apparently caused by a burn at some remote period. A nervous man, he hated to have the large, lonely office to lock up by himself: he had heard dark and vague stories of robbers who lurk in a building all day to take valuable lives at night. "It would be a too-serious thing for the firm if I wass addacked," he used to say; "not dat dere is much moneys in der safe, ass regards dat is gonerced; but all der books would be in confusion if I wass taken off." Towards the end of the year, he usually awakened to the fact that his account-books were grievously in arrear; and having fussed about all day doing nothing (as Lucraft, a masterful young man who hated the German, resentfully observed) he made other people stay late to see him do his work after dark. There

was not even, as in some offices known to Mr. Lucraft, anything "hanging to it," the fact being, as this critic forgot to say, that everyone was so well paid, and could so unfailingly obtain a holiday or other indulgence at any time, as to leave no possible excuse for grumbling at a few hours' overtime.

The real occasion of the present late staying, however, proved to be of a different character. The book-keeper made hardly a pretence of working. He went out "to get a cup of tea" about half-past five, as soon as Mr. Douglas had gone home, and returned smelling of whiskey, to pull out a huge array of accounts and letter-books, and fidget over them until the others came back. Thurlow, the second clerk, had "met him out" by secret arrangement: Lucraft and Peters having "Tommy-dodged for teas" (I quote Mr. Lucraft's technicality), returned together, and, when they had similarly made a show of doing something, they sate side by side, nudging each other, talking in whispers and glancing at the other two.

Thurlow was to them the object of some distrust. He ran intermittently and by outward profession (so to say) with these, the hares; he hunted covertly with the hound, Schneider: so that the hares mildly disliked and the hound despised him. He was a puny fellow, with dank black hair and small eyes in swollen pink lids, that looked somehow as if he might have worn a poultice on them all night; he dressed in a shabby morning-coat suit and a turn-down col-

lar; had a tiny brown moustache cut very short; knew a great deal more about the clerical part of business than anyone else, including Schneider, despite the latter's paraded secrecy about the "dead" ledger, and received a salary far in excess of his real worth, in consideration of long service and a large family.

"Let's see one of those smokes you won, Peters," said Lucraft presently. Having been a loser in the same raffle, he was not inclined to let Peters keep all the spoil to himself, as the latter providently wished.

"You aren't going to smoke, are you?" inquired Peters, cautiously.

"I am, though," said Lucraft. "It's after office hours, and Thurlow says that old Schneider never says anything if he lights a pipe when they stay together."

"Oh, Thurlow!" said Mr. Peters. "What I mean—you know what Thurlow is—very brave when Schneider's back is turned, but sings a different song when he's on the job."

"Quite so," said Lucraft, the wily. "But I'm going to show you how to work it. Have you got the smokes on you?"

"Some of 'em," said Peters, producing three in an envelope.

"Hand 'em over," said Lucraft. "H'm" (examining them critically and picking out one, of which the wrapping-leaf had been broken in Peters's pocket). "One apiece. One of 'em's a corpse. We'll give that to Thullo. Now watch the oracle."

Schneider was behind the safe, in a distant corner of the office, diving into the pocket of his overcoat, where he carried a flask, occasionally resorted to. Lucraft whistled softly, and receiving no response from Thurlow, went coolly up to him and offering the envelope with the butt of the damaged cigar slightly in advance of the others, forced it as a conjurer forces a card. He was, indeed, a neat amateur conjurer himself, and frequently diverted Peters and Thurlow with feats of sleight of hand during the leisure which, by a skilful abstinence from undue exertion, he had secured to everyone in office hours.

Mr. Thurlow took the cigar, nervously glancing in the direction of Mr. Schneider, still invisible. A subdued gurgle came from behind the safe. Thurlow unbuttoned his coat to get at his inside pocket; but Lucraft, who had thoughtfully foreseen this, had no intention of having the cigar carried away. He struck a match on his trousers and handed it to Thurlow, promptly returning to his own desk, and leaving his colleague with no alternative but to apply the light to his cigar end. Peters, who was not without a sense of humour, giggled hysterically. Lucraft punched him gently in the short ribs, and gave him one of the remaining cigars, holding up, however, a warning finger.

Immediately afterwards the book-keeper emerged from the corner, pulling down his moustache. Rather curiously, for a German, he

was a non-smoker, and the first sight which met his eye, precisely as Lucraft had intended, was Thurlow timidly lighting a cigar. The others covertly watched the effect of this, and when it became clear that the proceeding was to be tolerated, Lucraft passed the matches to Peters. He lit his own cigar last.

Mr. Schneider took no notice of what had happened. He got up on his stool, chose a pen and wiped it on his coat-tail; took down a ruler and ran it through his hands, put both down and turned a leaf of the ledger before him; then stepped down and walked with short steps to the end of the office and back, twisting his hands nervously together. Lucraft, an admirable mimic, was in the habit of rendering this proceeding to the life, when "the old man" (as the clerks called Schneider) had gone to the bank. It was indeed Lucraft's excellent imitation, his well-observed selection of the German's odd phrases—"My Gott, A'mighty Gott," "As regards dat is concerned" and so forth—that Mr. Peters had on Christmas Day reproduced, rather than Mr. Schneider's own manner.

Presently the book-keeper, by a gesture called the other three around him, and seated on the edge of his stool, fidgetting nervously with everything within reach, began to talk. He detested, and was detested, by everyone in the place. Mr. Douglas, the only active partner in the firm, is included in this remark, though the reserve of the principal's manners never indicated

a personal feeling that could in the least suggest a special emotion towards any of his staff.

Mr. Schneider, on the other hand, made a great show of regard for everyone. Especially of the "firm's interest" and his zeal for it did he constantly talk, whenever he could get the chance. Over the clerks he exercised a vacillating authority, depreciated by the fact that he was constantly expecting them to sympathise with himself for the supposed neglect of the principal, and putting on an air of "standing solid" with them against innovations supposed to be injurious to the staff. He had (for example) fussed with everyone over the introduction of a typewriter, and the young woman who worked it in a room specially fitted up for her, "put aside from all off us, chentlemen," said Schneider; "an' mark my vords, to be a spy. *I haff peen in der place all dese years, and we haf to work in the open office: ass soon as dis young voman coom, she is blaced in a room mit herself alone. I dell you, I shall make some rebresentations dot de governor gannot icknore, and you will supbort me!*" Of course, nothing whatever came of this.

On the present occasion he was inflated with a nervous self-importance equally futile.

"Vell, chentlemen," he began, "vot you t'ink off dis last moof from der governor? Vot? You hain'd even hearn off it? Aboud his son, I mean."

"Oh, about his son coming into the office? Yes," said Thurlow (who had had the whole

thing over before in a "private bar" with the book-keeper at what was euphemistically known as tea-time).

"What about it, Mr. Schneider?" asked Lucraft, puffing his cigar.

"Wod about it, Mister Lugraft? Well, wod you t'ink about it? Do you like it? Do you t'ink it iss a goot t'ing for all of us?"

"Is it either good or bad?" asked Lucraft, judicially.

"Goot? Bad? Vell, wot you t'ink? You vill 'ardly belief me, chentlemen: but it is der fact vot I tell you. I am der book-keeper. I keep der dead ledger, vot's got all der brivate aggrounds in him: all der gonfidential aggrounds dot no one understand but mineself: vot der governor 'imself couldn't do mitout me: and I wass nefer told von vord about dis t'ing. Der governor haf said to me, 'On der day off der New Year I brings my son inter der office.' Finish! Dat's all! Vot you t'ink?"

"Rough, don't you know," said Thurlow, with exaggerated concern. "That's what it is. What sort of consideration does it show, eh, you fellows?"

"More und more," pursued the book-keeper. "Somet'ing vorse as dat. Mister Beters, vill you look inter der room from der typewriter unt see dat Miss Chippendale haf gone 'ome?"

"It's all right, Mr. Schneider," said Lucraft. "I saw her go."

"Nefer mindt. Go und look; she might haf coom back und listen. Vait a minute. I go mineself."

He toddled off, with his queer, short step. They saw him pass into the room and turn up the light, looking all over the table, and pulling out the drawers beneath it. The door swung to behind him. Lucraft instantly assumed the gesture and attitude of his absent chief.

"My Gott, A'mighty Gott, chentlemen, as regarts dat is goncerned," he said, brisking up his moustache with his hands. "How do you like dese cigars? Mister T'urlow, vot you t'ink of Meester Beters's vinnings, py gootness?"

"Mine won't burn," said Thurlow, looking at the cold ash.

"Wrap a cigarette paper round it," said Peters. Lucraft, with a cautious eye on the door, mimicked the book-keeper's stealthy toddle to the safe, and uttered an imitative gurgle exactly like the noise of his flask. Then he returned to his companions, again pretending to adjust his moustache, after the manner of Mr. Schneider. "My Gott, A'mighty Gott, chentlemen," he resumed, "do you know vot is coming? Mr. Schneider's position is being oontermined. I'll bet you drinks that the old man's position is being undermined," he concluded, resuming his natural English. "Is it a go?"

Before the others could reply the door opened and the German rejoined them.

"She is not dare: I choost dook a look rount to see if dere vass anyt'ing else being plotted behint my pack," he said. "Der governor make all sorts of plans, und say nodings to me: und in six mont's' time I haf to make my books all

ofer again, because he ain't told me vot he done. Dis very day, chentlemen, if you pelief me, I go into der room of der typeswriter young woman, and I say to her, 'Miss Chippendale, I suppose you vill like to know dot der son from Mr. Douglas wass coming inter der office?' Vot you t'ink she say to me, chentlemen?"

"Haven't a notion," said Lucraft.

"She say, 'Oh, wass dat all, Mr. Schneider? I t'ought eferyone known dat a mont' ago!' Dere, chentlemen. Und I am der book-keeper. I haf der dead ledger, und der gombination of der safe, und I make der aggrounds from der firm, vot no one oonderstand but mineself—vot der gofornor himself don'd oonderstand. Und dis is der typeswriter young woman, vot peen here one and a half year und write vot she is told from der gofornor, und she say, 'I haf known it for a mont'.'"

"Bloomin' rough, ain't it?" said Thurlow, with a jackal-like glance towards the others.

"Vot you t'ink vill happen, ven dis son from der gofornor coom in here? Shall I gif oop my books? Vot shall I do? How can I do my work—my work vot no one in der place oonderstand but mineself? Zuppose dis young man come and want to open my dead ledger and read my aggrounds, vot is gonfidential. If I say to him, 'You must not tooch dose books, Mister Douglas, Junior,' von't he tell me, 'I am der son from der gofornor'? Und vot vork shall I gif him to do? Who goes away to make room for dis young man? Me? Donnerwetter!

He can take my place if he like. I tender my resicknation—if he can do der books. I tell you vot it is, chentlemen: *my position is being oondermined!*” (Lucraft let fall a ruler, which Peters scuffled in his polite haste to pick up, and hide a snigger.) “Yes, chentlemen,” pursued the book-keeper, “my position is oondermined: all our positions is being oondermined. Vot you goin’ to do about it?”

“We mustn’t stand it; that’s what I say, don’t you know,” said Thurlow, with an indefinite stoutheartedness.

“Quite right,” said Lucraft, Socratically. “We mustn’t. But the question is, how can we help it?”

“Yes, that’s the point,” said Peters, who always supported Lucraft, of whom he was a good deal in awe. “What I mean, how can we help it?”

“Excuse me, chentlemen,” said Schneider, “I haf lost my han’kerchief.” He retired behind the safe again, and the faint “cluck” of the flask set everyone grinning. Lucraft raised a corked ink-pot and affected to drink from it with a great relish.

“I tells you vot we haf to do,” said the book-keeper, hastily rejoining them and taking from his pocket the missing handkerchief in order to wipe his mouth. “We must gombine.”

“Yes, that’s it. Combine, don’t you know,” said Thurlow.

“Yes, but what I mean—” Peters began.

Lucraft trod on his toe. “Shut up, you Jug-

gins," he whispered. Then he added aloud, "Quite so, sir. Of course we shall all be ready to follow your lead."

This was not at all what Schneider wanted. But Lucraft infinitely preferred to egg the German on into some indiscretion rather than allow the staff to be led into compromising itself. In common with his fellows, he had a lively sense of the advantages existing in the office. If only Schneider could have been got rid of, the place, he felt, would be a paradise: and one, moreover, presenting opportunities of advancement for himself.

"We must gombine," repeated the book-keeper mysteriously, fidgetting afresh. "Ve are all in der same schwim-boat, und der teufel take der hindmost, as der prophets say. Dis son from der gofemor, he coom in. Very vell. I am not gonsulted. I can't show him not'ing: I haf no instructions, isn't it? Mr. T'urLOW, he haf no instructions neider. No one haf no instructions to show him not'ing. Der gofemor put him in der office. Finish! Isn't it? Best t'ing is, der typeswriter young woman. She haf soom instructions I suppose. She know all about it a mont' ago. All right! Der best t'ing iss dot Mr. Douglas Junior sit in der room of der typeswriter young woman and learn to play der songs mitout vords from Mendelssohn on der typeswriter, don't it?" He took out his gold watch, a present from Mr. Douglas five years ago. "My A'mighty Gott, chentlemen, it iss nine o'clock, und not'ing done. It iss too

late to do anyt'ing to-night. Und vot iss der goot of doing anyt'ing ven all our positions is oondermined? Der best t'ing is dat we lock up der office, und den we go und take a drink of whiskey und go home."

The young men, willing enough to be released, put the books in the safe, Peters holding a match while Schneider turned the handle of the combination lock which closed it. "Vot's diss?" said the latter, picking up a paper from the floor. "Ach, Himmel, yes. I ought to haf drawn on dat feller a bill to-day. Nefer mindt. I do it in der morning, und it haf to go into der next agground. We haf lost a mont's interest derewith, talking aboud dis son from der gofernor. Ha! ha! Dat's der first t'ing he do for der firm: he lose his papa a mont's interest. Dat's aboud all he do, isn't it? Come on, chentlemen; help me put out der gas and lock oop der place. Mister Peters, vill you put der key in der lock before I make der outside gas out? T'ank you. Come along, chentlemen: let us go und take a drink."

CHAPTER VI

A YOUNG MAN FROM OXFORD

AN observer unacquainted with the manners and characteristics of the staff might have predicted for Edmund Douglas somewhat unpleasant beginnings in his father's office. A groundwork of suspicion seemed to have been prepared for him: and men who had talked as these four have been heard to talk might have been expected to let him know it. But, in fact, they trusted each other too little to act together, even if they had not stood in a wholesome awe of their employer; and the vapourings with which Shneider had regaled his colleagues over-night vanished in the morning. In a week "young Dug" (as Lucraft had promptly nicknamed him to Peters) was fully and comfortably installed, and had begun to feel his way cautiously to an estimate of his father's clerks.

He was disposed to like Lucraft better than any of the others, justly esteeming him the cleverest man in the place. And in no way had Lucraft's cleverness been better employed than in his careful study of the best ground to take with the newcomer, on whom he contrived to produce an impression of frankness, humour and good-fellowship, seasoned with exactly a proper amount of deference and with no more.

It was with Lucraft alone, therefore, that young Douglas was conscious of the dawn of an emotion that might become friendship; and this was exactly what Lucraft desired. Schneider, with the same object—for he was capable of grumbling at the young man's advent while still endeavouring to insinuate himself into his confidence—blundered at the outset. Lucraft noted, with the amused content of a master in tact, his ludicrous blending of patronage and servility. Thurlow was too openly obsequious to be treated otherwise than as (in an apt phrase of Mr. Yellowplush) "a well-behaved munky." Peters was a nonentity. He merely tried to ingratiate himself with Edmund by an over-acted show of zeal for the firm. With a little guidance from Lucraft he might have done better: but Lucraft had no idea of abiding a rival near his throne; he scented advantages for himself in Edmund's presence which he had no intention whatever of sharing with anyone else.

Only in one way—and on the first morning of the latter's entry upon the scene—did Peters profit by his colleague's astuteness. The custom of the office was for the clerks to arrive somewhere between nine and ten. The nominal office hour was nine. Mr. Douglas was never seen before eleven. Schneider usually came in at about ten o'clock, and no one was considered late who arrived before him.

As Lucraft and Peters bade each other "good night" on New Year's Eve, the former remarked:

“Better turn up at nine to-morrow, Pete. It’s on the cards that the Gov. will come in on the stroke, by way of teaching the young idea. It won’t do us any harm if we are found there.” He had wit to perceive that to be himself the only punctual man in the office—to have appeared earlier than his junior—would exhibit too great an effect of artifice: he was at pains therefore to secure Peters’s early arrival in his own support.

The event justified his intuitions: Mr. Douglas, black-bearded, tall, and of heavy build, with Edmund, tall, too, but slimmer and of a fairer complexion, walked in soon after nine, to find Lucraft and Peters ostensibly busy—in reality on the thorns of apprehension: for having been at the pains to get up early themselves, they would have been disappointed had their colleagues arrived in time to share the advantages of their distasteful punctuality. Thus it happened that Edmund (whom none of the clerks had ever seen) was introduced to these two before anyone else: and that the nervous Schneider toddled up an hour late, to find all the letters opened by his employer instead of by himself, and a message left for him with Thurlow (who came in at half-past nine, as usual) that Mr. Douglas would be glad to see him on his arrival, in order to introduce him to Mr. Edmund.

For this ceremony the German prepared himself by a whispered colloquy with Thurlow, accompanied, as Lucraft maliciously noted, by glances not too friendly at himself and Peters.

"You must haf slept bad this morning, chentlemen," he observed viciously, in passing them.

"No, I didn't; but I got up early," Lucraft replied impudently. Mr. Peters, lacking his colleague's readiness, turned rather pink, and said nothing. Mr. Schneider walked off in the direction of the private room, rubbing his palms on the seams of his trousers, ready to shake hands.

The only member of the staff wholly unperturbed by Edmund's appearance on the scene of business was Miss Chippendale, the typewriter girl. She was in her room before anyone, as usual: she never had occasion to remain behind in the evening, and never took advantage of the opportunities which the easy discipline of the establishment allowed, to arrive late in the morning.

It would be to exaggerate her indifference, perhaps, if one implied that she felt no curiosity as to what manner of man young Douglas might prove to be: and she would have been less than a woman to be unimpressed by his appearance—his crisply curling hair, his good shoulders, and well-grown moustache. For Edmund had inherited his father's good looks, and something more than his stature. Oxford had put its stamp upon him too. His manner was distinctly "good," if a little inexperienced. He spoke with a marked Oxford accent.

Mary Chippendale was herself a woman of not quite an ordinary type, though her outward divergence therefrom was as much a matter of

dress as anything else. Short, dark-haired, and decidedly pretty, with clever, humourous eyes, and a skin like a brown egg, she dressed in a taste characteristic of her, or rather (to be quite accurate) of a quasi-artistic coterie to which she belonged. Women would have thought that she did not make the most of herself: and certainly her loose dress, with its large low collar, flouted the vagaries of fashion. Borlase's customers would have sneered at it. She wore no stays, on principle and because her spare figure did not require them. She might, in short, have been conceived as posing to herself as rather an "advanced" young woman, and certainly she did not esteem herself a commonplace one: the severity of her costume, and her plainly-dressed, fringeless hair, her uncompromising stride as she briskly entered the office every day with her *Morning Leader* (*vade mecum* of the enlightened proletariat) under her arm, all sufficiently marked that. She was thirty, and always alluded to herself as a "woman," with a sharp resentment against anyone who treated her, in a matter of business, as entitled to any more indulgence than a man; considering herself, not unjustly, to be as competent as any man could have been in her work.

If Edmund managed eventually to find a place for himself, and to put himself into that place without rubbing anyone very seriously the wrong way, it was to Lucraft that he owed this success. He accepted instruction good-temperedly, and did whatever work came to him, in

a way which left no room for anyone to deny that he did it with intelligence. Lucraft steered him very skilfully over the shallows of the Schneiderian mind—for, without being in the least fanatically peace-loving, he providently decided that the time for cataclysms likely to benefit himself could only arrive when the young man should have gained enough experience in the business to be a real power in it. By judicious and apparently unintentional hints, therefore, Edmund Douglas found himself warned of Schneider's foibles, and, profiting by the process, took care (for one example) to give that worthy no ground for complaint that his sacred ledgers had been invaded.

To say this is not to say that he did not commit blunders of taste and tact—he would have been something more than a very ordinary and quite sufficiently self-approving young man from Oxford otherwise. Thus, he consulted Lucraft in a way that made Schneider wriggle with jealousy, and often carried to the young man, whom he liked, difficulties in which the book-keeper would have been a good deal better satisfied to instruct him. This aggravated the aversions existing in the office: if Lucraft had been as raw as himself there might easily have been provoked an overt explosion, where, as things were, Edmund's preference only caused secret heart-burnings and bickerings, to which the tactician had no objection whatever.

“My Gott, Almighty Gott, T'urlow,” said the German to his crony, one night when they

stayed late together. "Dis young man, he make a nice hay of the place, isn't it? Dese boys" (Lucraft and Peters, gone home, were thus contemptuously referred to), "dese boys haf such swelled heads, now der gofornor's son come to play mit dem, dat dey valk out off der place der moment der clock strikes six ass if dey vass der book-keeper, bei Gott!"

"Just the same," said Thurlow, who would have liked to go home himself.

"Dey valk oud, and dey don't ask anyone if dere vass anyt'ing else to be done. I 'spect dey gone to talk us all ofer, und see how dey can oondermine our position. I tell you, T'urLOW, it vass a serious t'ing for you. You are a married man: you haf your children you ought to t'ink about. Vot you let your position be oondermined dat way for? You know it is a serious t'ing for you? You are different as me. I know der books; der gofornor know very well he can't do mitout me. I haf said to him, 'I t'ink I resigns: I vant to go home to my fatherland und my people.' Der gofornor, he say, 'Take a holiday, Mister Schneider: you go and see your peoples und you coom back, und I ingrease your money!' Donnerwetter—I don't vant my money ingreased; vot I vant, I vant ter be treated mit der proper respect. I belief"—he advanced this idea as a proposition almost incredible—"I belief dat impudent teufel Lucraft he mock me behint my pack!"

Thurlow, who was as ready as anyone to

laugh at Lucraft's impersonations, responded by a number of deprecating nods that seemed to stamp as only too likely a conjecture that (he implied) he was quite unable either to approve or to deny.

"I subbose, ven dey get home at night, der gofornor ask his son, 'Vell, vot you heard to-day?' Isn't it?" pursued the book-keeper. "Dere isn't anyt'ing dat go on dat he don't know aboud. In der old times, eferyone was trusted: ve did all vot ve like. Nowadays, dere is young blut in der office, as der gofornor say. Yes. Yoost t'ink of it. I haf der private ledger; und dis son from der gofornor, one of dese days, he say, 'Father, dat ole Schneider, he gets old. Give me der private ledger, father.' Und he get it. Finish!"

"Hum! Have to learn it first," said Thurlow sympathetically, as if a ledger were a sort of *arcanum* that required prayer and fasting for its proper understanding.

"I tell you vot, T'urLOW. You know vot I mean ter do?" pursued the book-keeper darkly. "No? I tell you. I yoost go on der way I was aggustomed: only I wrop up der ledger a leetle; I make him a leetle bit dark, eh? I am not going to have my brains suck for der son from der gofornor, no! Isn't it? But observe, I go on der vay I vas aggustomed. You haf seen der gofornor's son: he get here—Gott knows vot time he get here! Perhaps he coom back after dinner und sleep oonder the desk, aren't it? Vell, I coom at my usual time. If he don't

like it, he can tell der gofernor. If he tell me, 'Old Schneider, you are late,' you know vot I shall tell him? No? 'Fery well, Mister Edmun': den you tells der gofernor.' Finish! Aren't it?'

"Oh, he wouldn't take the liberty!" said the shocked Thurlow, who had himself secretly taken on new habits of punctuality. The German began to work round to his object, which was connected with precisely this point.

"I subbose dese boys of ours—dey crawl inter der gofernor's favour, ain't it?" he said.

"How d'y' mean?" asked Thurlow, in his amorphous, ill-articulated speech.

"Ach, you know vot I mean. Dey make slaves from demselves. Dey turn up on der morning about eight o'clock, in case der gofernor's son catch them late, isn't it?"

"I don't know. How should I know? They always came before me, y'know," said Thurlow, who was getting uncomfortable. "I don't consider I'm compelled to wait outside for nine to strike, an' rush in, y'know. I' been here twenty years, man and boy. I should think I can be allowed half an hour in the morning."

"Certainly. Isn't it?" said Schneider, delighted. "Der same t'ing at lunch time. I t'ink you cut your loonch time a little short, T'ur-low,' he suggested anxiously.

"I didn't mean to, if I did," said Thurlow untruthfully. His customary hour and a half had, in fact, been cut down to the statutory sixty minutes. Edmund had a way of pulling

out his watch when Thurlow came back which led that worthy, after an experimental mumble one day that he "had had to make a call," to reform his plan.

"I don't advise you to do it!" said Schneider, forgetting his recent warning to Thurlow as a husband and father. "Stand oop for your position! If Lucraft and Peters likes to coom at nine o'clock der morning, all right. Dey are der juniors. Der gofornor know very vell who is the important people in der office den. If he want to make a slafe-galley off der place, all right. Finish! You und me, T'urlow, we don't stand it, isn't it?"

"No fear," said Thurlow valorously. Schneider, who loved much beer over-night, equally hated early rising. He wavered, besides, between a desire to exhibit his own importance in the eyes of the other clerks by coming in when he chose, and a secret pusillanimity which inclined him to curry favour by improving his habits. The incident of New Year's morning rankled disagreeably in his memory, and he feared the effect upon his employer of the contrast between his own tardiness and the resourceful punctuality of his fellows. He had, of course, no confidence whatsoever in Thurlow's protestations, and was secretly afraid of being the only man to keep up the old tradition. He consequently perpended the matter all the evening, when he reached home, and eventually sought the confidence of a compatriot who lived in the same boarding-house.

"If you think Thurlow is playing you a trick," said the latter, "why don't you go down early and bowl him out?"

Schneider considered this suggestion, with the result that when, punctually at nine next morning, Edmund joined the three clerks, he drew Lucraft out of the hearing of Peters and Thurlow and said:

"Did you see Mr. Schneider outside?"

Lucraft chuckled. "Yes, rather!" he said. "But he didn't see me. He was inside the door of the tobacconist's opposite. Where did you see him?"

"I saw him there, too," said Edmund. "He seemed to me to be hiding from someone. What do you suppose is the matter?"

"I don't know," said Lucraft, "unless he wanted to see what time you came."

"H'm. I don't know that it is any business of his," said Edmund stiffly. "I'm always here before he is: and if he wanted to know he could have asked me. I don't like being spied upon." And he went downstairs to the warehouse.

Lucraft took his place beside Peters. "Don't look up," he said, with a covert glance at Thurlow, who sat at another desk. "The old man is outside, watching the place. Young Dug twigged him. If you go and look through the blind, you'll see for yourself. He's just inside the doorway of the 'bacca shop."

Peters went cautiously to the window and came back.

"He isn't there now," he whispered.

"Gone to get a liquor, I expect, then," said Lucraft. "Don't tell Thurlow. I wonder what damned German trick he's up to now? I beg pardon, Miss Chippendale" (to the typewriter girl, who had come from her room). "What did you say? Mr. Edmund? He's gone downstairs for the packing-book. Can I do anything?"

"No, thanks," she replied. "I wanted to ask him something, that's all," and she walked away.

Lucraft—and this is notable, for he was popular with most women—was held in aversion by her. Perhaps even this may be taken as a compliment to his intelligence: for neither Peters nor Thurlow had enough individuality to produce upon her mind any effect whatever. "Our lady friend is quite struck on young Apollo," commented Lucraft with a grin: "he was mashing her for an hour yesterday afternoon, Pete"—an aspersion quite unjustified, as Edmund had merely been receiving, in consequence of a suggestion from his father, an initial lesson in the mysteries of shorthand.

Mr. Schneider was at his desk on the following morning before anyone else. He had exhibited a marked coolness towards Thurlow all day.

CHAPTER VII

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENTS

It will have been perceived, among the foregoing trivialities, that Mr. Lucraft was a young man of considerable parts. He combined an intelligence much in advance of his education, with craftiness of a degree which almost gave it the dignity of wisdom. He was not more unscrupulous and untruthful than his fellows: where he excelled them was in the faultless tact which masked these defects, giving them a countenance of the most genial *bonhomie* and candour. His readiness, his good looks, his pleasant and even fascinating manners, his wit, the unending supply of his good stories admirably told (he was a good-humoured and excruciating mimic, a jester who never repeated himself), his juggling, the endless things he knew how to make out of paper, pens, penholders, nutshells, or apparently any material which came to hand, his absolute insusceptibility to boredom, and his manifest enjoyment of every moment of life, made him the darling of children and idle people of all sorts. I should do him an injustice, suggesting that all his amiable characteristics were artificial or were insincere. He was indeed of an excellent humour, and loved the admiration and liking which it was his art to evoke. See-

ing him in the act of this evocation, watching the frank readiness with which he gave away his own conjuring tricks, the untiring patience and unfeigned delight with which he taught them to others—well aware that he surrendered no whit of his own preëminence thereby—you would not have dreamed that his clever tongue and unfailing readiness stood him in just as good stead, when he found occasion to browbeat an opponent, or reduce a rival to silence with words that were able to provoke tears of humiliation and remorse, as Lucraft presented his own side of a dispute in which altercation the other man, lacking his voluble speciousness, had no chance of presenting his perhaps better case. It was, however, precisely to this last faculty that Lucraft owed the unquestioned ascendancy which he enjoyed over his fellow-clerks: no man alive could conceive and utter such bitter things with so admirable a modesty. But his fascination was such, and such the magnanimity of his willingness to forgive and forget the injuries he had yesterday inflicted, that the fear by which he ruled was forgotten under the cloak of affection which he compelled his associates to throw over it. It was so natural to him to charm, that he charmed habitually, even in the absence of a set motive. No one really detested him but Miss Chippendale.

The deliberate purpose of which he was so abundantly capable underlay (as has been hinted) his attentions to young Douglas; it would have been a miracle—and a regrettable

one, after all—if Edmund's inexperience could have resisted such maturity of fascination. Only Lucraft's moderation allowed this preference to be kept within decent and uninvidious bounds, excluding almost the possibility of envy; Lucraft, indeed, contrived a most excellently judicious aspect of drawing everyone within the circle of his own geniality, and of Edmund's companionship. The establishment of a general good understanding with the son of the employer could not but be advantageous to everyone. Lucraft, in his good time, would perfectly well know how to make it especially so to himself.

The only member of the staff who entered into none of these gatherings was meanwhile making acquaintanceship with young Douglas on more strictly utilitarian grounds. Edmund (as we have seen) had been advised by his father to learn shorthand of her.

Mr. Douglas was a widower, Edmund his only living child. Their relation had always been close: they shared interests, amusements, and even hobbies, the father coveting the friendship of his boy, the son delighted with the companionship of his father. The latter was too wise to strain the bond; he even purposely made it a rule, by dining out, to leave Edmund to himself on three or four nights a week. He had been so long lonely, and had suffered so often, that he had learned almost to expect disappointment. The wife and the young children of whom death had robbed him; the friends who had

drifted away; the tastes that had somehow left him, too; these things, in their going, had given him a grey, imperturbable wisdom which was as far as possible removed from cynicism, taking rather the form of a sweet reasonableness which had forgotten how to murmur even in the presence of Fate's most bereaving acts.

Young Douglas had accepted with avidity the plan of shorthand-learning his father proposed: and his enthusiasm for that discouraging study was no whit cooled by the fact that he found Miss Chippendale an uncompromisingly critical instructor. He called at a bookseller's on his way to town one morning and provided himself with the whole literature on the subject, and therewith a reporting book, a fountain pen and a lead pencil said to be especially suited to stenography. It was exactly like any other lead pencil; but there was nothing else the matter with it, and it pleased Edmund just as much.

Miss Chippendale received his first request for instruction in her usual matter-of-fact style, and set him to work on the uninspiring study of the rudiments. He laboured for four hours, and then left her, to do some office work. Miss Chippendale pecked steadily at her typewriter the while, exhibiting none of Lucraft's readiness to beguile the hours with conversation. Yet Edmund, somehow, found her good company, and early learned to respect her.

Of course they soon began to talk—no later, in fact, than the second day of his studies. Edmund, with a sigh, rose from a couple of hours'

drawing of characters which it would be flattering to call pot-hooks. He said:

"There! I fancy I can draw these things all right now, Miss Chippendale."

"Do you?" she replied, shutting down the carriage of her machine with a smart click, and examining over her shoulder the book which he held out. She neither rose nor took it from his hands.

"Yes, I think so," he answered. "Don't you?"

"Well, I'm afraid I don't," she replied austere, when he had turned several laborious pages for her.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

She took the book and, clearing away some papers, laid it on the flap of her small table.

"Are these *Rs* or *Chs*?" she demanded, indicating with her pencil some of Edmund's monotonous lines.

"They are *Chs*," he reported, after consideration.

"H'm! Well, they're not nearly steep enough," she decided. "And what are these? *Ys*?"

"Certainly."

"Well, you began all right. But look what a hook you began to give them at the end of the line. And look how they curl up."

"Does that matter much?"

"Of course it matters, Mr. Douglas. Everything matters. No. I *don't* think you draw these things 'all right.'"

"How long does it take to learn shorthand, Miss Chippendale?" he asked her next, ascending to generalities.

"It depends upon the learner, Mr. Douglas," she replied gravely.

"If the learner sticks at it?"

"If the learner—sticks at it—it takes—" She paused, and her eyes laughed.

"Well, it takes—" He paused also, smiling back. He perceived that he was being, as Lucraft might have expressed it, "drawn."

"It takes a longer or shorter time, according to the sticker." Miss Chippendale concluded rather priggishly, but it was impossible to resent her good-humoured insolence.

"In my case how long will it take me, then?" he asked, laughing, however, and balancing himself against the back of a chair. She had very pleasant eyes.

"It depends upon you, in your case," she repeated obstinately.

He laughed outright. "Really, Miss Chippendale—" he began. Then: "Well, put it in another form. How long did it take you to learn shorthand?"

"That is a much easier question to answer," said she. — "It took me about eight months to learn shorthand, Mr. Douglas: but then I had other work to do at the same time, and I had my brother's house to look after."

"How long does it take most men? Have you taught many people?"

"I have begun to teach a great many people."

“Well, now—you’re fencing with me, don’t you know, Miss Chippendale?” Edmund’s vanity was suffering under her whip. “If a man gives, say, six hours a day to it, how long is it before he can ‘report’? That’s the word, isn’t it?” he inquired.

“It is a word often used,” Miss Chippendale admitted in her precise way. “If a man starts by giving six hours a day to it, he generally learns all the shorthand he will ever know in about a fortnight.” She laughed outright now—and the laugh might have been thought an ill-natured one, if her eyes had been less kind. “You asked me,” she reminded him.

“In other words, you don’t believe I shall go through with it, eh?”

“Oh, well, Mr. Douglas! No, I didn’t intend to say so at all. But I do say that you are less likely to get tired of the subject if you put on a little less steam at first. It can’t be called fascinating: you may have observed that.”

“No. But it’s extraordinarily philosophical—the system,” he said.

“Ah, you have noticed that already? Really, I have hopes of you,” she conceded, still bantering.

“You are very kind, Miss Chippendale.”

“I beg your pardon. I didn’t intend to make a personal remark. Yes, it really is philosophical. You see it is less an invention than an evolution. All sorts of improvements and alterations have been tested, and those which answered in practice were incorporated into the

system. The fit things survived. But there will always be a certain amount of drudgery at the outset; you can't avoid that. There's no royal road to anything worth having, don't you think? But when you perceive how philosophical it is, you have really done a great deal to lighten your task."

"To sum up then," said Edmund, "it requires perseverance mainly?"

"Yes. But I shouldn't persevere too long at a time. Two hours at a stretch is quite long enough." He looked at his watch, and she, with an air of dismissal, lifted the typewriter carriage again.

Edmund left her, and went out to talk with Lucraft—a relaxation which that worthy never discouraged.

Lucraft, Edmund had gathered, did not approve of Miss Chippendale. You are not to imagine that he said so—the supposition would be a libel on his social genius. But Edmund gathered the impression, which was a perfectly correct one. These two were antipathetic. The keynote of Mary Chippendale's character was an uncompromising sincerity and an instinctive abhorrence of sentimentalism. Lucraft was both insincere and (as one divined), sentimental. Neither knew very much of the other; but their intuitions conflicted, and developed a mistrust which, in the woman's case at least, had grown into actual aversion. What Lucraft thought of Miss Chippendale he did not tell to anyone, having no purpose that could be so subserved. Miss

Chippendale's estimate of Lucraft was only confided to her favourite brother, and to him less as a matter of psychological interest than as the personal grievance which such instinctive aversions are apt to grow into. "I detest the man," she said.

The two came very little into contact: and yet there was between them a sort of covert, unconscious antagonism. Miss Chippendale, as soon as she had found that young Douglas was not in the least apt to patronise or condescend, abated the rigour of the attitude she had at first instinctively adopted, for she was not a young woman who readily permitted condescension. She found, later, that she had been (as she frankly put it to herself) ridiculously prejudiced; and in further self-examination decided that the young man's frequentation of Lucraft's company had been the cause. The woman's natural requirement of a scapegoat thus at the same time fulfilled, nothing is more natural than that Miss Chippendale should wish to counteract an unwholesome influence. She did not in the least perceive (well, we need not be surprised if her humour had its limits) that the tables were hereby turned, and it was she who was implicitly patronising Edmund. Even if the thought had occurred to her, she would have dismissed it on the excuse of her own greater experience, and of duty. The duty of removing a man from an intimacy which she personally dislikes renders every woman a Spartan mother for conscientiousness.

It ought to be said, however, in favour of Miss Chippendale, that this conscientiousness entered into all her work. To her it would have been unbearable to accept a salary and not do the utmost work, and the best work, for her employer that she was capable of. And her detestation of Lucraft and contempt of his fellows arose chiefly from an ingrained resentment of hers: she had quite enough acuteness to perceive that they thought of nothing but how to get as much money for as little work as possible. It would be expecting too much of her to say that she might have perceived that the upbringing and environment of all of them were less favourable to a conscientious view of life than her own.

Lucraft, in his disapproval of the typewriting lady, used against her quite the most formidable weapon for such a struggle. With the most admirable reserve and discretion he hinted a general contempt for stenography as a study which (he conveyed) Edmund rather condescended in dabbling with. Useful, of course; yes. Oh, certainly useful, in a humble way—as an implement to be used by underlings to save the time of superior people: not an accomplishment in any sense. And he passed to other subjects.

Just about this time, however, the opportunities for idle conversation began to be restricted. Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender had recently dispatched a clerk of some years' standing as traveller abroad, and the orders (such as they were) which he obtained, and the voluminous reports

which arrived from him by every week's mail, required attention. The importation of this new element into the business of the house involved a considerable access of employment.

Especially Edmund Douglas found plenty to do. With work to his hand, and the early zeal of his novitiate cooling, he allowed his studies in shorthand to suffer. Miss Chippendale smiled, and Lucraft reticently rejoiced. Edmund, making great strides in practical knowledge of the house's interests, laboured strenuously therein. The new department enabled him to take charge of something without displacing anyone; and the others—who were, of course, indirectly affected too by the increase of labour—had no desire whatever to thwart his anxiety to do what they would otherwise have had to share among them; an unearned increment for which they had assuredly no taste.

Lucraft, therefore, seemed to perceive the stars in their courses fighting against his opponent, of whose antagonism he was subtly aware. But a remark which he let casually fall a week or two later might have discouraged him by its effects. Something had been said by Thurlow, who had a typewritten document on his desk, on the advantages of the process.

“Yes, it looks well,” Lucraft admitted. “But of course the great merit of those machines is that they don't need any intelligence to use them. Any fool can rattle a typewriter.”

“Yes?” said Edmund, with an interrogative accent. “But all typists are not fools, for all that. And I suppose there is good work and

poor work, and conscientious work and lazy work, in typewriting, like anything else."

Growing experience of his father's business had taught him many things: of which one was that Mr. Lucraft, like most other people in the office of Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender, would have allowed almost anything to happen rather than over-exert himself.

As a couple of months went on, Edmund's time was more and more fully occupied, and he found less leisure for conversation. The growth of his department, indeed, presently made it necessary to advertise in the newspapers for a junior clerk's assistance; the staff was growing. "The fact is," Mr. Peters explained to Tom and Harry Wheble, with whom, to his own honour and glory, he was fond of discussing office affairs, "the fact is that my work has grown so that the governor couldn't help seeing it was too much for me. He's going to get a young man to help me." Having had, since the departure of the other lad, to fulfill the duties of junior clerk and factotum, though his age and experience would really have enabled him to take a higher place had there been room, Mr. Peters found his own dignity considerably enhanced by the prospect of a newcomer to rule over and order about.

"Your firm is more considerate than most, I *must* say," said Mr. Thomas Wheble, with a snort of general disapproval.

"Well—what I mean, you know—they know when they're well served," replied Mr. Peters sagely.

CHAPTER VIII

“OUR ANNUAL SALE”

MEANWHILE—for it is up to March that the events narrated in the last chapter have brought us—Stanton Borlase had experienced for nearly three months the ways and customs of his adoptive parent.

Mr. Borlase could not have denied the lad's anxiety to approve himself worthy of his prospects. When—as happened not infrequently—Stanton's zeal led him into error, Mr. Borlase was rigorous, and even severe with him. Stanton, for his part, learned that the guardian of his poverty was a benefactor “gey ill to live wi’.” Lacking all the experience that might have shown him the greatness of his debt for even clothes and shelter (to say nothing of nurture, education and upbringing), he had the unreasonableness to require affection. I will not say that he was unthankful: the duty of gratitude was indeed impressed upon him in every accent of his patron's voice. Mr. Borlase could hardly approach the Throne before or after eating (as he punctually did) without an inflection which somehow seemed intended to remind Stanton that the power of true thankfulness desiderated from on High might legitimately have a mundane object also. The reflection was perhaps

a little profane; but other most unexceptionable expressions have before now been known to prove unfortunate in their evocations.

Mr. Borlase was conscious of no change in his sentiments towards the boy. He had expected—he had (he felt) a right to expect—that Stanton would behave well. He was pleased with him for so behaving, on trial. But, the first urbanities of his new relation with the lad having worn off, he treated him austere, though he liked him after his own fashion, and proposed to do well by him. Mr. Borlase was not the man to know that love is a sweeter emotion than gratitude. Stanton was not old enough to have learned that affection often lurks in very inclement hiding places.

Thus (as often happens), while the benevolence of Mr. Borlase lacked some of its deserved appreciation, Stanton's gratitude had taken on the aspect of a duty instead of an emotion: and youth was never fanatically hospitable to duty. The keenness of his moral sense had been somewhat blunted, by this time, by recurring experience of that insidious entity, "the custom of the trade." Custom of the trade excused any and every opportunity for unearned profit; and where sophistical argument might have failed to convince Stanton that it was honest and proper to take advantage of other people for the benefit of his patron, the matter-of-fact dismissal of such things with the cant plea of custom inevitably dulled his consciousness of them.

He was increasingly popular in the shop, and

accommodated himself well to his surroundings. Even in appearance he was much like his fellows, now that the first newness of his Christmas clothes had worn off, and his elbows shone a little. Always pale and inclined to sallowness, the scant, gassy air of the shop, and the late hours of work, were fast giving him the muddy, anæmic face of a London lad. His superior feeding did him little good, for he took no exercise, and spent such hours of leisure as he had in reading.

Herein Wicksted abetted and sometimes guided him: they shared a magnificent and soulful misappreciation of the inferior graces of literature. They had also grown to understand each other fairly well, and Wicksted's tacit detestation of his employer had been divined, without offence, by Stanton. Naturally, nothing was said on the subject; but Stanton, too, had grown to think that the young men and women in the shop were rather shamefully sweated. He never, perhaps, reached the point of reprehending the sweater: and, besides, it was, no doubt, a custom of the trade. Mr. Borlase was of so magnificent an unconsciousness; his airs of respectability and benevolence were so habitual and ingrained, and the Suburb so unhesitatingly accepted him, at business, at the Vestry, and wherever his praised public spirit made him loudly conspicuous, at his own valuation, that it would have needed a maturer and more independent mind than his adopted son's to detect hypocrisy. Indeed, one sometimes doubts

whether even Mr. Borlase realised himself: there is no humbug so unruffled or so overpoweringly successful as your unconscious humbug. And flattery, of which the suddenly deceased Mrs. Borlase had been an apt and generous purveyor, is able to dull an acuter and more self-accusing spirit than that of this well-satisfied Guardian of the Poor. All things worked together to make Stanton, aware of his own debt to his patron, accept that patron somewhat at his own liberal valuation. Even the colossal humbug of the spring sale gave no qualms; indeed, neither Stanton nor anyone else had much leisure for niceties of conscience. The business of writing new and higher price-tickets and correcting them in red ink to about the regular level; of absorbing and correctly disposing of much inferior stock, to be ingenuously sold off as "bargains"; of cutting up factitious "remnants" from piece-goods that had not gone off well (for five yards and three inches look cheaper as a "remnant—about five and an eighth—for three and fourpence" than at their usual price of sevenpence three-farthings a yard); these things employed all his energies for many days before the actual "rush" began. And the glorious prosperity of the three sale-days themselves, when the shop was full from nine in the morning until ten at night, and even the early-closing custom of Thursdays was intermitted, drove everything else out of his head. It was a period of quite unique discomfort, and made several of the young women ill. But Borlase & Company

"took" an enormous amount of money, and there is no crown without its cross.

The time of Easter came fortunately that year. It fell immediately after the sale, and many thrifty suburbans took the bait of uncostly finery which Borlase & Company had prepared for that contingency. Indeed, chip hats sold so well on the second day that Stanton was dispatched in hot haste after lunch to the warehouse of a German firm between Aldersgate Street and what he found to be called, not in vain, Jewin Street, to exhaust their stock and demand its immediate dispatch. Returning, he met Mr. Borlase at the shop door.

"Got 'm?" demanded the draper in a low tone.

"They'll be here in half an hour," said Stanton.

"Good!" said his guardian. "How many?"

"About fifteen dozen, sir: they'll put in all they have. I couldn't get the extra two and a half per cent. for cash though." (He had, as a fact, lacked the moral courage to ask for it.)

"Oh, all right. Don't talk. Get to work," said Mr. Borlase. A girl called him.

"Have we any more of those chip hats at eleven three, sir?" she asked.

Her customer was a red-cheeked servant-girl—far better off in health and happiness than the young ladies of Borlase's, if they had but known it. She looked up from her chair for Mr. Borlase's reply.

"There are just a few more, I think, in the

warehouse, miss," he said, speciously addressing the servant, "unless I am mistaken. A young lady is looking for them now."

"I'm rather pushed for time," said the servant, who had left a perambulator outside, wherein an unregarded infant, supposed to be taking the air of Peckham Rye, was endeavouring assiduously to choke itself with the bone "comforter" attached to its waist by a string.

"I'm afraid they are rather put away," said Mr. Borlase. "Our stock down there is so enormous, you see. E—normous! If you should be passing again, I'll see that one or two are reserved for you to choose from."

"That'll have to do, I suppose," said the girl, with a sniff. Her eye wandered round the shop. Mr. Borlase pulled down a huge feather boa. "Anything in this line?" he inquired. "We're letting these go wonderfully cheap, what we have left of them. They may be all gone before you get back again, there's such a run on 'em." He left her to the young woman at the counter, who had meantime been disposing of jet trimmings and some very flamboyant rooster-tails, known in the trade as "coque's wings." The feather boas, although bought at an incredibly low rate in Jewin Street the week before, had proved rather an unhappy investment, and Mr. Borlase had more of them in stock than he liked. The servant-girl did not buy one.

The whole place was packed. Women stood in patient rows, and circulated slowly in a long *queue* between the counters, viewing the display

of sale goods. Every available space was covered with baskets, to display as many different bargains as possible. Nothing adds to the impression of cheapness more than to mix a variety of objects and label them, "all reduced to three pence three-farthings," and this trick was well known to, and liberally practised by, Mr. Borlase. The opportunities of a shoplifter must have been great, and perhaps some pilfering occurred. The eyes of the proprietor, though, were everywhere. In the larger shops detectives are employed at such times: Mr. Borlase was his own policeman.

Not that he would have perpetrated the imprudence, except in the case of flagrant necessity, of arresting a thief (we do not call them kleptomaniacs as yet in our part of the world); the young men and women were supposed to look to the safety of their stock, and had Mr. Borlase seen anything stolen he would probably have charged it, at selling prices, to the attendant. But South Camberwell, despite its unprepossessing appearance, is more honest than some of its betters, and peculation rarely occurs in our shops—a subject for legitimate self-congratulation in the Suburb.

The sale, therefore, prospered exceedingly, and only a few of the assistants got any tea. The chip hats arrived at the side door just as Stanton came down from a hasty meal—eaten standing—and he employed himself at once in the business of unpacking them. As many as remained at the end of the week were trimmed

after a jerry-built manner in the workrooms over the back shop, and sold, at a profitable increase in price, as summer novelties. Thus does the "remnant" of one week become the leading attraction of another, renewed like the eagle at the expense of the wasted youth of worn-out men and maidens.

Stanton's movements, during the trying season of the sale, and in fact all his acts both in and out of the shop, were quietly but closely observed by Mr. Borlase. The latter, indeed, saw at all times a good deal more than he spoke of. Not that he suffered the shortcomings of anyone to pass unchidden. To do so would have appeared to him a negligence such as he deplored in public confession every Sunday somewhat perfunctorily, since he was rarely conscious at all of having done those things which he ought not to. He was accustomed to reprove any error not actually finable, on principle. If you did not complain when your shop-people behaved carelessly, you would have no right to be surprised if they went on being careless. In the case of his ward, Mr. Borlase was conscious, too, of responsibility nobly fulfilled, when he caught him tripping and sharply scolded him for his good.

Nor can it be pretended that Stanton's guardian was peculiar in this. There are many people with whom the comminatory part of one's duty towards one's neighbour will always receive more scrupulous performance than any other. But it was not merely when he was

scolding that Mr. Borlase scrutinised young Stanton. On the contrary, he studied the lad's demeanour and characteristics with shrewdness and discrimination, and watched for the development of his character with attention.

This development was in some respects slower than he wished. Stanton had fallen easily into the place prepared for him. He did what he was told willingly enough, though with no very marked ability: but the only sign of his individual predilection was a strong distaste for shop-walking, or any duty which required him to accost the public uninvited. Above all, he displayed neither originality, resource, nor particular personal taste in any matter: and Mr. Borlase was proportionately dissatisfied. He wished his son to be, like his adoptive parent, a person having some force of character. It was like Mr. Borlase to expect, and to be angrily disappointed when he did not perceive, the prompt appearance of the characteristics he desired. Stanton's timid bashfulness, his submission and obedience to his guardian's will and commands, seemed to that guardian eminently proper. But Stanton's easy acquiescence in other people's convenience, his readiness to help anyone who seemed to desire help, and to save trouble to the shopmen and the "young ladies" of the counter, appeared to Mr. Borlase in the light of weak amiabilities, all the more irritating because they took no form which he could complain of. After all, Stanton was endeavouring to "make himself useful," as he had been bidden.

Only he should have been useful to the business, not to the assistants. And certainly he should have had ideas of his own, for his own benefit or for the benefit of Borlase & Company. Whereas, he was a mere pawn on the board. Even on holidays he appeared not to care particularly where he was or what became of himself. It was not thus, Mr. Borlase was aware, that great business men are made, and he would have entertained a higher opinion of his protégé had the latter even shown occasional signs of mild revolt—not that any weak appreciation of such a symptom would have restrained his guardian from prompt repression of the rebellion.

“I wish you’d have some plans of your own for once,” he said to him, testily, on Good Friday, when, in reply to the question, “What are you going to do with yourself this afternoon?” Stanton had replied, with his usual timid good-humour, “Anything that you wish, sir.”

This interchange took place as they were returning from church. Mr. Borlase’s middle-Victorian attitude of mind had not absorbed the more recent usage of regarding Good Friday as a day of mourning and more than Sabbath asceticism. The sublime and tender allusion of the Liturgy for the day said nothing to him; and the popish customs of fasting and self-repression on what, after all, was only a sort of modified week-day, interruptive of trade, would have aroused his profound distaste. He attended church on the morning of the Day of

Tragedy chiefly because he was a churchwarden, but partly also because the bleak exercises of the occasion commended themselves to his austere mode of religious taste. For the same reason of personal predilection he was in the habit of attending service on Ash Wednesday. It was agreeable to hear the sins of the sinful condignly denounced, and from Mr. Borlase's ideas nothing could have been more remote than that any custom of his own trade came within the scope of these denunciations. Mr. Borlase, indeed, never considered religion or the Bible as exercising any relation to his own conduct: he had too high an opinion of their Author to suspect them of any ill-mannered personalities. Cursed, then, be he, by all means, who removed his neighbour's landmark. Mr. Borlase obediently abhorred such wickedness, without, perhaps, taking very much thought as to what it meant. There was nothing whatever said about undermeasuring your neighbour's calico, and Mr. Borlase's withers were unwrung.

If Good Friday could by any paradox fall upon a Sunday, Mr. Borlase would have regarded with equal horror the idea of enjoying oneself. But the calendar fortunately decreeing otherwise, he deemed decorous relaxation as excusable then as at any other time, and was genially prepared to let Stanton set off in search of it. The latter would have been willing enough to seek enjoyment had he known where to go for it. But his spirits were not high, in spite of a glorious day. The heavy week's work

had left him indolent and languid; and disuse had deprived him of the taste for exercise. When invited, therefore, to say in what way he proposed to amuse himself, he had no views to propound.

But finding that he was expected to want to do something, he obediently prepared a desire to go out, after one o'clock dinner.

"I think I'll take a walk round the Rye, sir," he said, as they ate their cheese. And Mr. Borlase answered sententiously:

"All right, my boy. Go, by all means. Boys will be boys: but don't get into any mischief," and Stanton felt rather a prodigal.

His guardian, it appeared, did not intend to accompany him, so Stanton set off alone, with his hands in his overcoat pockets, and his eyes, as usual, on the pavement.

Peckham Lane, where Borlase & Company's establishment was situate, wore an air of somewhat Sabbatarian jauntiness. The shops—even the bakers', bunless now—were all closed, and groups of young men and girls in knitted comforters and well-buttoned clothes (for the weather, though bright, was still cold) walked idly along in the direction of the Rye, with practical jokes of the rudimentary kind which pass for amative advances in their class. On a piece of open ground, where even in summer the grass would never be allowed by the feet of the district to make more than a decent pretence of growing, stood a sanguine ice-cream barrow, where, with a weak deference to the peculiari-

ties alike of our climate and our taste, roasted chestnuts were also on sale. Near by, a board, tied to the railings, made no secret of the fact that in a neighbouring chapel the Reverend J. Elijah Peterson would (D. V.) preach at half-past six next Sunday; subject, "Riotous Living." A few ill-clothed men stamped their feet and breathed on their fingers, while they exchanged jokes, outside the regretted portals of a shabby beer-shop. The air was full of a vague rumour and noisiness which grew louder as Stanton made his way towards Nunhead Lane, leading to the goal of his expedition.

This murmur analysed itself into mechanical and conflicting music from several sources, and a vast quantity of shouting, when he drew nearer to Rye Lane: and it became frankly a tumult when the Rye itself, that object of the London County Council's benevolent exertions, presently received him.

For the Rye, bathed in the rare, pellucid sunshine of our cold spring, was crowded with working-class humanity. Along the sides of the dividing road, just above the larger pond, were rows of barrows, whose proprietors acclaimed the virtues of the nuts, oranges, and extraordinarily unattractive sweetmeats and cakes which loaded them. In the pond itself some boys were even "paddling" with unclean limbs laid bare to the cold. One urchin, boldly defiant in absence of the maternal will, was exhibiting an admirable independence of spirit by splashing about in boots and stockings. Within the cob-

ble-stoned enclosure near the King's Arms, stood tethered a stableful of low-spirited donkeys, in charge of a handsome gypsy woman: and on waste ground a little way off, a steam circus, furnished with an organ of excellent brassiness, was doing a splendid trade, the strains of its music executing a warning *rituendo* as each pennyworth of circular delight wore to a despairing end.

Stanton paused on the kerb to watch the gilt and mirrors of this machine whirl round. A group of factory girls—some wearing even to-day the white apron of their pride—shared the lovely spectacle, and one of them, over a defiant shoulder, invited Stanton to “stand” her a ride. The whole group turned towards him when she spoke. “Come on, Mister, give the girl a chawnce.” “Go ’way; you ain’t got no manners when a young lydy speaks to you.” “Why don’t yer marry the gel?” He turned, abashed, to go.

“I s’y! Have you lost anything?” was a parting and successful shot from the first speaker—a delicate allusion to Stanton’s funereal-looking clothes, and a black satin necktie which Mr. Borlase had highly approved.

He walked away along the Rye, red-cheeked and angry-humoured. He took care not to lay himself open to fresh abashment by lingering again. The number of conflicting piano-organs was as astonishing as the quantity of babies that were being carried about. Everyone but himself was jovial and in high spirits: he alone

seemed to find the east wind chill and penetrating. The merry company was vocal, often with the most astonishing and harmless obscenity. I say harmless, because clearly no one attached the smallest real significance to his or her frightful expressions, which, in their innoxious scurrility, left untouched not the most intimate moment or function of man, from his conception to his everlasting (and fiery) destruction. Neither the speakers nor their hearers had even rudimentary imagination; else they must have fled in dumb horror, realising the signification of the words that were being uttered. For them these words had no immediate meaning: they were regarded merely as witty and tasteful expressions of good fellowship. A French mob of the same character would have had a hundred times the vice in it, without a hundredth part of these verbal horrors.

But Stanton was happily a lad of neither much imagination nor much experience, so that when he came within earshot of such groups, the words he heard seemed to him—as indeed they really were—quite meaningless. He walked fairly round Peckham Rye, and so down the hill home again, where, fortunately seeing only the housekeeper, he slipped up to his bed-room and lay on his bed, reading, until tea-time.

Mr. Borlase had remained in the dining-room.

CHAPTER IX

AFLOAT

It was by his reflections during the Good Friday afternoon thus employed by Stanton, that the immediate action of Mr. Borlase towards the latter was precipitated.

He had never purposed to keep Stanton permanently in the shop. The lad would gain a larger and more valuable experience elsewhere than the Southern Suburb could afford, and Mr. Borlase had intended to obtain for him some sort of employment "in the wholesale" at the first opportunity. This, I say, had been his intention. But by Friday night, in the maturity of his deliberations, he had thought out a totally different course of action.

For Mr. Borlase, whatever else may have been his faults, was no sentimentalist; and with all his commercial shrewdness, he was a man essentially of narrow mind and strong prejudices. He considered his success in life as due to the high qualities of his own intelligence, fostered by the necessity, which had overtaken him at a very early age, of learning how to look after an individual whom he approvingly denominated "Number One." The first step of this advancement, whereby he gained the confidence

of the wholesale firm which then employed him, and by whose development he was at length permitted to espouse with prudent ardours the far from attractive daughter of a junior partner, had been his dissociation of himself from a sort of strike among his fellow-clerks. The latter had the unkindness to denominate it blacklegging, so rare is the cardinal virtue of charity among the submerged. But Mr. Borlase attributed the progress thus happily initiated to qualities in himself enhanced by the necessity of early self-support. His upward path had been slow. Stanton, with the advantages of transcendent example and unstinted precept, might, he at first considered, acquire something of the necessary business faculty in the regions to which he was to have been wafted on the wings of Mr. Borlase's influential recommendation. But this was not enough. There was also, the draper considered, a certain hardness of moral integument not less necessary to commercial success. And the lad, however teachable he had approved himself, showed no rudiment of this callosity, distinguished by his Guardian as force of character. He was indignantly perceived to be, on the contrary, only too obliging, too ductile, too considerate of others. He would only, Mr. Borlase now decided, get hardened-up by the same rough discipline of the world as had yielded such pleasing effects in the person of Mr. Borlase himself.

Accordingly, on Easter Monday, Mr. Borlase bade Stanton await him in the drawing-

room after breakfast. "I wish," said he, "to talk with you about the future"—an announcement which effectually took away Stanton's appetite, and left him pale and nervous when the assistants had filed out to their holiday.

The wind having veered on Sunday to a warmer quarter, the bright weather of Holy Week had given place to a foggy and drizzling dampness. Outside the warehouse door, the cobblestones of the side street were grey with mud, the footway wet and dirty; but the men had all straggled out, in one direction or another: most of the "young ladies" remained indoors and gossiped in bed-rooms or in their sitting-room, having neither means of amusement, nor money to spend, abroad.

"I have come to the conclusion," said Mr. Borlase, with the air of one who announces the decisions of a Cabinet, "that you have been long enough in swaddling-clothes. It is time for you to think for yourself, and you are not learning to do that." He paused.

"No, sir."

"No, sir! You are having your way made for you. If you are ever to be any good in the world, it won't be because the world has made way for you. You will have to make it for yourself. Now, you haven't done that, have you?"

"I'm afraid I don't know quite what you wish—or rather, what you mean, sir," said Stanton, conscious that in some way or other he had been found wanting, and wondering what he ought to say.

"You are in swaddling-clothes at present," Mr. Borlase repeated, having been pleased with this metaphor. "I want you to prove that you can run alone."

"What do you wish me to do, then?" Stanton asked maladroitly.

"Damn it," said Mr. Borlase (with much emphatic effect, for he seldom swore, regarding the practice as immoral and undignified). "Damn it, I want *you* to wish to do something. Don't interrupt me! And I don't think you *will* wish to do anything so long as you are where you are now. You're afraid of the world, man! You're afraid of the sound of your own voice. You've got to make the world afraid of you, let me tell you, before you'll make headway. I shan't," said Mr. Borlase, with a pious glance in the direction of the ceiling, "always be here to make your way for you; and you'll go to the devil if you only learn to do what other people wish— Eh, what, Miss Wilkinson?"

A girl had returned to the room. "Might I," she asked, "be let in at ten minutes past eleven, to-night? I'm going to my married sister's in the——"

"You know the rule," Mr. Borlase interrupted, cutting short this explanation. "Eleven o'clock is time to lock the door, and the staff are expected to be in by then." He turned away.

"My sister lives at Holloway," Miss Wilkinson explained. "The last train gets down at eleven-five. The one before that is at nine."

“Well, what of it?” said Mr. Borlase, without looking over his shoulder. “Do I arrange the trains?”

“It makes two hours—” the girl began.

“Eleven o’clock is our time,” said Mr. Borlase. “If you don’t like it, you can get up early in the morning, and come in here at eight.”

The girl went out. Mr. Borlase, after waiting in testy silence until she had closed the door, resumed his discourse exactly as if nothing had interrupted it. “Consequently,” he said, “I don’t intend you to return to the shop. I intend you to try what you can do by yourself.”

He looked at Stanton, who had no answer ready.

“You will pack up your things ready to go away, and find yourself some lodgings,” Mr. Borlase continued. “I shall lend you twenty pounds, which I advise you to take good care of. You are to go to work on your own account, without any help from me; except—wait a bit—except that you will want a reference. You can refer to me for your first place. You will take your own name—call yourself John Stanton. Get a clerkship or something; I don’t care what. Please yourself. By what work you get and can keep, you’ll show what you are good for. Live as you can, and as you please. I expect you to keep yourself for a year, during which time you are not to use my name, nor refer to me for advice or anything else, except in the way I have told you, as your first reference. If at the end of a year you can return

me my twenty pounds—I don't want any interest," Mr. Borlase generously interjected—"I shall hear what you have been doing, and see what you seem to be good for. If you haven't got my twenty pounds to repay, but can keep yourself, go on working until you have got it back. Learn to save money, and you will learn to make money. That's a good proverb."

Stanton looked astonished and (I fear) rather blank. He had, in truth, not the least notion of what to do, and still less of what to say. Mr. Borlase awaited his reply.

"Very good, sir," said the boy obediently.

"I don't say but what I give you the choice," his guardian added. "If you are afraid to take it on, say so."

Stanton *was* afraid to try; but he was still more afraid to refuse. "I will try my luck," he said. "When am I to start?"

"To-morrow," said Mr. Borlase. "You will breakfast in my dining-room, and start out immediately afterwards. You are not to communicate with anyone in the shop. When you have got your lodgings, you can fetch or send for your box. I suppose you will bring a cab," he added with a sneer. "When I was a boy I should have carried it on my back."

Stanton sate still, looking at the tablecloth, and rolling little pieces of bread into pills. He did not understand his guardian's motives. Somehow—he knew not wherein—he seemed to be undergoing reproof. He would have liked to ask what his offence had been. He wanted

to say, "Is there anything I have done that displeases you? Can't you tell me, and let me amend it, without being turned out of doors?" But he lacked (as usual) the impulse to demand an explanation. He would have liked to offer to serve a counter, to herd with the grey-faced, black-coated assistants, to sleep in their dingy house, and eat their hard fare—if only he might remain where he had become accustomed to live. But he could not speak. His very silence now became an offence. Mr. Borlase, though honestly, and indeed rightly, persuaded that his plan was good for Stanton, was hardening his heart. "Haven't you anything to say?" he asked austere, as the lad still kept his silence.

Stanton swallowed hard. "It is rather a startler, sir," he said, looking at his plate. "I—I——"

"You—you——" said Mr. Borlase testily. "You—you——?"

"I haven't yet accustomed myself to the idea, sir," Stanton remonstrated. He almost had it in his mind to reproach the Monument of Benevolence across the table; the measure served out to him seemed so very hard.

Mr. Borlase perhaps divined as much. Even the dullest of us have our intuitions.

"I daresay you think yourself very hardly used," he said. "I expect it. I don't expect gratitude, thank God!" (Mr. Borlase often pointed an example by thankfulness for the moderation of his own demands.) "I don't look for gratitude, thank God, in this world——"

For once in his life Stanton interrupted his guardian.

"I hope I am not ungrateful, sir—I hope it isn't because I may have seemed so——"

Mr. Borlase struck into his speech:

"It isn't 'because' of anything, you little fool. It's for your good," he said. "I want you to make your own way. It is to make a man of you."

Stanton was almost ready to cry; but he had also pride enough to choke down this inclination. "You wish me to show myself a man, sir?" he said—and his head went up and his shoulders stiffened with a certain resolution. "Then I will try. No, sir; I am not afraid. I will try what I can do by myself."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Borlase, who seemed really rather difficult to satisfy. "Yes, yes. I've no doubt you think yourself a very clever person and quite able to look after your own interests. Well, you have your chance. Make the most of it. For I don't disguise from you that a good deal depends on it." And with this he rose rather menacingly from the table, and went out.

But he did soften a little—being, as already has been hinted, not without his own bleak affection for the lad—when bed-time came that night. So far as Mr. Borlase had ever experienced such a sentiment as affection, Stanton had been the object of that weakness. And when Stanton rose to go to bed, with the usual "Good-night, sir," his patron, across the supper table, held out a soft, cold hand. "Good-bye,

my boy," he said, not unkindly, "I am acting for your good, and you will thank me for this some day."

Stanton's eyes filled, and again he choked down something in his throat. A very little encouragement—it is pitiful to think how little—might have made him love this guardian, whom so few of his dependents found even tolerable, and would have enabled him to go forth with some higher ideal than mere self-preservation during the year of his trial. But Mr. Borlase's affection was too austere repressed, his emotions were too hardly controlled, to let Stanton perceive the sentiment with which he was regarded. He had been a stranger to all tenderness since the death of his foster-mother. Mr. Borlase had designed to make him strong; he had only succeeded—and Stanton did not realise even this—in making the lad heart-hungry. His shyness gripped him hard even now, and gave him a measure of self-control that seemed callousness. He merely repeated, "Good-night, sir; I thank you now," and walked out of the room to cry himself to sleep, after having laid out, ready to pack away in the morning the two or three toilet necessities which for so long now had been the daily reminders of his loss of the only being who had ever kissed him.

And in the expensive drawing-room Mr. Borlase sate still, looking before him, and blaming his ward's ingratitude—which shows how unreasonable the shrewdest of us are, and how cruelly the intimate privacy of every human soul cuts off sympathy.

Stanton went quietly away in the morning without having seen his guardian. The latter had gone early to the shop as usual, and Stanton, we have heard, had been forbidden to enter it. Only the hard-faced housekeeper saw him leave the premises; and it was she who helped him to carry his light box downstairs, when, presently, he arrived to fetch it—a man, now, with a name and address of his own.

CHAPTER X

“ DIGGINGS ”

STANTON'S search for a lodging occupied him during some hours—hours spent in weary walking through many miles of side streets, in a wretched state of indecision. Cards in a window attracted his painful attention at every turn; but the houses which displayed these decorations perturbed his uneasy spirit. Those which appeared at first sight eligible as possible future residences alarmed his prescience; he feared that they might be too costly for his pocket—the reflections of the night had warned him that he might not find a situation very easily, and that he must at all cost minimise his outgoings. But the houses which looked safe on this score alarmed him in another way; the hard-featured, slatternly inhabitants who overflowed these premises gave him frequent pause, and often drove him hastily on when they inquired, as he peered at “ Lodgings for a Single Man,” ill-written or worse printed on a window ticket, whether he “ might ” be looking for “ diggings.” His departing steps were more than once followed by inquiries as to what the—anything suggested by the taste and delicacy of the inquirer—he was gaping at, then. So, he walked about, until three o'clock, when a dull emptiness at the

stomach reminded him that he had not eaten since breakfast, and he stood up in a baker's to eat a couple of currant rolls, whose insipid stodginess gave him the impression that they must be at least filling. Presently, in a confectioner's, he washed them down with what was called lemonade, out of a large bottle with a deceptive lemon for stopper—a beverage chosen with the mistaken idea that it might correct the indigestion which the rolls had already begun to inflict upon him.

Finally, after walking many weary times in wretched irresolution up and down a street which seemed to strike the sort of medium between the savagery which frightened him and the splendour which aroused his misgivings, he knocked at what seemed to him in some vague way the most harmless of the many doors which offered shelter to the uncomplicated male, and waited—in vain—for a response.

The house had three storeys, with a sunken yard in front and the usual railings and area-bell. The two windows on the street level had shabby iron-gauze blinds with brass tops, here and there black where the lacquer had come off, and green "venetians" nearly meeting them. One knows the kind of house: sunlight is excluded on principle, in the interest of carpets long past damage by any bleaching agent. The door was "grained" in the usual horrible parody of oak, worn and cracked by the sun. The knocker was an equally conventionalised laurel wreath in cast iron; apparently it was not very

effective as an instrument of summons, for Stanton's timid *rat-tat* produced no result. A butcher-boy with empty tray walked along the pavement, on the opposite side, whistling stridently and looking for a cat to chivy. Catching sight of Stanton, who was standing on the edge of the door-steps and looking up at the windows, he stopped at gaze. Presently lounging across the road, he accosted the stranger.

"Cawn't make no one year?" he inquired.

"I have knocked," replied Stanton, "but no one seems to be coming."

"W'y don't you knock agen, then?" suggested the butcher boy; and Stanton, his fear of seeming impatient dominated by the stronger will, obediently repeated his former attack on the door.

"'Course they cawn't year yer if you don't knock no louder than *that*," said the critic. "Here—let me 'ave a go;" and taking the knocker he gave a resounding single knock, and retreated to the kerb to note the result. A woman in soiled apron came out into the sunken yard and looked up.

"Was that you knocking?" she inquired of the blushing Stanton.

"Yes—that is, no, I mean," he stammered, getting redder at each word. The butcher boy, sighting a dog-fight, had suddenly walked off. The woman stared. "What do you want on the doorstep, then?" she inquired.

"I—I believe you have a room to let," he replied.

"Oh, then you did knock," said the landlady. "What did you say you didn't for? Wait a bit; I'll come up."

She disappeared, and after an interval, during which her apron had somehow vanished also, opened the door. A practised eye had taken Stanton's measure on the instant. "Very comfortable room on the second floor, back; eight shillings a week," she said, being, like a certain Prince, "fat and scant of breath." The usual rent of the apartment was six shillings, with "attendance," included.

"Oh," said Stanton, irresolutely. He had not an idea on the subject of rent. The landlady eyed him in silence for some seconds. Then, "Will it suit you?" she asked.

"I—I don't know," Stanton replied. "Er—is it furnished?"

The landlady was perceiving more fully every moment the kind of youth that generous fortune had led into her toils.

"Well, sir," she said ingratiatingly, "the room *do* 'appen to 'ave a little of me own furniture in it at present, w'ich, of course, I was intending to remove to make room for your things. But if you *wished* it furnished I daresay I could do without 'em, an' for a extra two shillings a week you could 'ave the room as it stands."

Stanton still hesitated. Ten shillings a week, plus the cost of his food, would, he felt, quickly exhaust his capital.

"Per'aps you would like to see the room,"

pursued the landlady with the air of one who proffers an unusual concession. "This way, sir, if you please," and she hustled him up a narrow, steep staircase, covered by threadbare carpet. This adornment gave place at the second flight to thin oil-cloth, badly laid and folded in creases secured by tinned tacks, where the stair turned. The room to which she conducted her victim was a small one, not very clean. It had a piece of striped Kidderminster carpet on each side of a stump bedstead; a chest of painted drawers with a dull looking-glass on the top, a washstand, two odd chairs and a towel airer, painted, like the washstand, in stone colour with a green line completed the furniture. In the centre of the mantel-piece stood a large earthenware decoration, representing two foresters in what was doubtless a conventional rendering of Lincoln green, with bare, pink legs and topped boots. These sylvan warriors supported a sickly-looking clock face, on which the hands, however, were painted, like the figures; it was not what Mr. Crummles would have called a "practicable" clock. There was a rag-carpet before the fenderless hearth.

The landlady pulled up the blind to display more advantageously the splendours of this apartment, and drew attention with a wave of her hand to its furnishing, its decorations, even the chinaware of its toilette. Stanton still hesitated; but in the hands of the mighty, it is written, the youth who hesitates is lost.

"I suppose you would like to come in at once, sir," said the proprietress.

“Oh—er—yes; this evening,” said Stanton, letting himself drift with the tide. “I’ll—er—get my box sent round from—er—my old lodgings.”

“Very good, sir, w’enever you please,” said the woman. “You’ll find the room ready and clean, as you see it, any time. That’s my motto: ready and clean, I says, and then no one can throw your rooms in your face”—a reflection certainly justified.

Stanton walked downstairs with a cautious hand on the balusters—he had tripped on a tear in the oil-cloth in coming up. As he reached the entrance, the landlady spoke again; she was not going to let a good thing slide through her fingers.

“You’ll excuse me mentioning it, sir,” she said, with a reproachful intonation, and looking hard at Stanton’s hand, which was on the lock. “But I suppose you would wish for to leave the usual deposit, wouldn’t you?”

The desire had not, as a fact, attacked Stanton; but he turned as red as though he had been detected in some subtle meanness, and replied:

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs.—er——”

“Mrs. Smithers, sir, at your service—only a pore widow-woman as you see, sir,” she added. Her snuffle added to Stanton’s sense of his own meanness.

“I beg your pardon, Mrs. Smithers. I was forgetting it. Yes, of course. I—er——” he fumbled in his pocket and produced a sovereign. “I suppose this will do?” he concluded lamely.

“Oh, certainly, sir. Whatever you wish,” said the landlady. “Indeed, but for being a pore widow-woman, which I named before, I shouldn’t ’ave thought to have named it, sir. In fact with a gentleman like yourself,” she added—as by an afterthought, when the money was well bestowed in her own purse—“no deposit was needed, only you appeared to wish it. Yes; *good* afternoon, sir; and I may look to see you this evening, sir?”

“Yes; presently,” Stanton absent-mindedly assented, as he made good his escape.

The door closed unobtrusively behind him, and, relieved at all events of the uncertainty which had beset him all day long, he walked briskly Suburb-wards. It was nearly dark, and the young men and maidens of the counter had all had tea when (with the hansom contumeliously foreseen by Mr. Borlase) he knocked at the side door, and received his worldly chattels from the housekeeper. This woman without bowels had nothing to say to him. She nervously hurried him off the premises. For an instant he caught sight of Wicksted—the only person in the establishment with whom he had been on any terms of intimacy—passing to the warehouse. But Wicksted emphatically did not see him; and Stanton understood that he was pledged not to seek his friend’s counsel. So he left the house for the last time without farewell or godspeed of any sort. He had, by means of a board outside the police-station, ascertained the distance from Borlase’s to his new

abode; and the enamelled iron plate inside the splash-board of the cab enabled him to calculate the fare. When, at length arrived after a cobble-stony journey, he had carried his box within doors, he correctly paid the driver.

“Gawd forgive you,” said the cabman.

Stanton, blushing, went upstairs.

CHAPTER XI

THE BACK PAGE OF THE NEWSPAPER

FROM the cogitations of a sleepless night, Stanton's morning consciousness disentangled two facts—that he could hardly, within the limits of his guardian's impositions, ask (as he had at first intended) for employment in any of the wholesale houses from which Borlase & Company purchased; and that, even if, as his inexperience conjectured, a walk through the city might discover some such window-announcement as "Clerk wanted here," he would hardly produce the best impression on a personal application.

Going forth, however, to a coffee-house for his breakfast, and being there confronted with a newspaper (now greasy and scored with round tea marks from yesterday), he had the chance to open this soiled journal at "Situations Vacant." Here indeed his heart rose—to sink again at the frequent mention of a junior clerk's hire: "wages, £26 a year." Why, his room alone cost him that—with nothing for food, nothing for clothing! How then did a junior clerk live? Nevertheless there came to him the warning reflection that even ten shillings a week would be better than nothing, and that he might be driven

to such employment for want of better. Meantime, drapers' assistants seemed to be at a yet heavier discount. With nevertheless a little encouragement at the number of vacancies in employment of all kinds apparently existing, he experienced a heavy dubiousness as to his own prospect of being allowed to fulfil any of them. When he had scanned the whole alphabetic column—all the way down to "Warehousemen Wanted," "Xylonite moulder Required," and "Young Man (sharp) for the Bar"—of refreshment, not of Law—he came upon a fresh source of perturbation. For the "Situations Wanted" were, if less numerous, even more discouraging, than the employments vacant. The services proffered in this portion of the newspaper so uniformly accommodated the requirements of the former, and the stipends mentioned were so humbly modest, that Stanton found it difficult to divine why questing employers did not seek out advertising work-people, instead of flaunting their own needs expensively at three lines a shilling. Nevertheless, there was here something practical; he had found something he could do, and hastily gulping down the nourishing coffee and distasteful bread of the place, he sped forth, to return presently to his bedroom with paper, envelopes, a shilling's worth of stamps, and three newspapers.

With these he sate him down, to discover, when he had cleared the dressing-table for his purpose, that he still lacked pens and ink, and must go out again to buy them—at a cheap rate

and of a highly displeasing quality. Returning, he addressed himself to a dozen of the least discouraging advertisers, and having presently scented a conceivable advantage in being first in the field with his applications, he picked out those letters which were not, by advertisement, addressed to newspaper-boxes, and carried them himself to the city, trying on the way, as his custom was when he had any interview in anticipation, to picture the sort of questions he might be called upon to answer, to-morrow, should his plea for an "appointment" to call be somewhere successful.

The addresses in the advertisements afforded little clue, or oftener none, to the businesses pursued by the advertisers. The most promising of all of them led him up four flights of stairs to a dusty room where a shirt-sleeved man with a large nose, sate with his feet on the table and over a cigar stared inquiringly at Stanton as he delivered his letter. A tape-machine ticking in the corner, was the only business-like object in the room. A curt "Clerk wanted; apply by letter in own writing to D., Asterisk Street," on the other hand, proved to emanate from a vast drug firm, in whose office something like a hundred clerks, row behind row, crowded and inconceivably shabby, were writing for dear life, interrupted by warehousemen in black aprons here and there burned red with acids, who made their way between the serried ranks, to grab at bundles of invoices and hurry away again. Stanton was accidentally met by a stout man with a

vast watch chain, who took his letter with a "Wait a bit; what's this?" and read the envelope through a pair of eyeglasses held in his hand.

"Oh," said this personage, "so you're the first man after the job, are you?"

Stanton did not reply. "You can come in. I'll dispose of you at once," pursued the manager, and led the way to a match-boarded room, with a Turkey carpet, threadbare and ill-swept, and a large coke fire, much too hot. He sate down and pointed to a chair, while he read Stanton's letter half aloud, punctuated with remarks of his own: "H'm—'some months in large retail establishment'—what's the good of that?—'educated'—h'm—'book-keeping,' 'certificates of proficiency'—who cares for certificates?—'good reference from my late employer'—that's more to the point. Er—why did you leave the large retail establishment, John Stanton?"

The speaker had put the gold eyeglasses low on his nose, and threw back his head so as to see Stanton through them. He had a loud voice and a manner that his equals may have thought jovial. "That's the chief point," he added.

"My guardian—that is, I mean—I wished to gain experience in the wholesale," Stanton said in a low voice.

"Speak up, man! I can't hear you. You wished to gain experience, eh? Then I suppose you don't expect much money. Well, your writing is all right, if you can write fast. What 'screw' do you ask for?"

"I should be satisfied with—with a pound; to begin with," Stanton replied.

The manager crushed his letter into a ball and threw it into the fire. "Well, you're soon settled," he said with a laugh. "A pound a week. Good God! You must expect a head clerkship! A pound a week? Why, young man, I can get Germans, thirty years old, well educated—know French and been to Universities—for ten bob; dam' glad of the work, too; and beautiful writers at that. What do you waste my time with such puppy-talk as this for? Here, good-day. I'll send for you when I want a general manager. You're too steep in your ideas for a clerk."

Stanton, whom the fire was making sick and uncomfortable, slunk out, red and alarmed. He delivered his remaining letters furtively, dropping them into the door-box whenever he could find one, and placing them on a counter and hastily getting away, when he could not.

The next day he spent in idleness, the harsh lesson of repeated failure not yet having taught him how safely he might multiply his applications. In the evening a couple of advertisers, attracted by his admirable penmanship, had curtly intimated that he might call next morning. To his twelve letters, these two proved the sole response. He waited upon his correspondents punctually. His pitiable nervousness would have acted against him in any event, and though by good fortune he met with kindly and reassur-

ing treatment at both places, he met with nothing else that was encouraging to his desires.

Indeed he met with everything which could well add to his growing despair, for a pound a week, the least sum which, even with the severest economies, the most ingenious retrenchments, offered to his imagination the desired possibility of maintaining his capital, seemed ludicrously out of reach. The University-taught German at half that sum was not, indeed, again quoted to him; but he had it conveyed that fifty pounds a year was the reward, if not of long service, at least of riper experience than he could muster; and before a week had supervened upon his struggles he was considering that, supposing his clothes to last a year, he might make do, for current expenses, with fifteen shillings.

He also began to look for cheaper lodgings; for Mrs. Smithers' "bill" remorselessly consumed his sovereign deposit. A week, that lady informed him, dated, of course, from Saturday to Saturday; he had hence nothing to gain by the two days which had passed before his arrival; and there was, she allowed him to know, "service" to be paid for; had she not, in addition to lending him furniture on terms which her tone abundantly told him were ridiculously low, punctually dusted the said furniture daily—to the distraction of his letter-writing? Had she not "answered" the frequent postman? And could he—she put it to him (she said) as a gentleman and a man of the world—could he expect a latch-key made under half-a-crown?

Stanton in despair made a sort of stand at the "service item." "Look here," he said, "I'm not very well off at present, Mrs. Smithers——"

"Which is no discredit to anyone," interrupted the landlady. "Never judge a man by 'is coat is my motter."

"And," he pursued nervously, "as I've plenty of time on my hands, unfortunately, I think I'll 'do' my room myself—just for the present."

Mrs. Smithers protested. It would hurt her, she said, to "have" a young gentleman, which anyone could see was a gentleman, and so brought up, though rejuiced, which was no discredit, lower hisself to menial work. That poverty is no crime, was, she added, her motto. She appeared to have been endowed with such an abundance of these maxims as might have done credit to Sancho Panza. "And rather than that," she concluded, warming to her subject, "rather than that, Mr. Stanton, I shall do it for one-and-sixpence, which is less than half. Say no more, sir; no—I don't want no thanks. Kindness is its own reward—that's my motter; and I wouldn't year a word of thanks—no, sir, not if you was to say 'em with your bended knees"—and she hastily withdrew, that Stanton might not utter in that strange way the refusal which Mrs. Smithers' voluble discourse had already twice cut short.

So, with a sigh, he conned his budget afresh; and on Sunday morning went out to reconnoitre fresh lodgments. His steps, by some inadvertence, led him to Camberwell Green, and he en-

tered that uninviting enclosure to sit awhile and rest his tired feet. Here, while he gazed with his ineffectual intentness at the grass before him, at the twisted wire of the rail, and the horrid little neat flower-beds which it protected, he heard his name, in a voice sweetly feminine, and, rising, found himself in the presence of Mrs. Wicksted.

It should have been related, that in Stanton's Borlase days, Wicksted had once or twice, as their intimacy grew, taken him home. Mr. Borlase, as both tacitly conceived, would highly have disapproved; it was his patron's menacing personality in the background that Mrs. Wicksted's startling address now vividly recalled to Stanton. He rose, and awkwardly raised his soft hat—a fashion of headgear he had copied to his disadvantage from Mrs. Wicksted's husband.

The sombre ascendancy which Mr. Borlase exercised over his dependants, in consequence perhaps of his apparent omniscience in the shop (where no smallest defect escaped merited reproof), was perhaps never better indicated than in the cloud of dubiety which stood between these two at the present moment. Stanton knew very well that Wicksted had been forbidden to meet him, and Mrs. Wicksted (from whom her husband had neither secrets nor separate interests) knew it, too. Mr. Borlase had given as a reason for his decree that he wished his ward to be absolutely independent; he had intimated his commands with some emphasis. A sort of guilty apprehension trammelled both their minds.

It was not that Mr. Borlase was likely to be at hand, overlooking them; but simply that the habit of fearful obedience to his iron will had become inherent. Stanton would have liked to pass on in silence; his fear of Borlase was naturally the more recent, the more acute. Mrs. Wicksted stayed him, and presented a plump hand to his acceptance.

"How do you do, Mr. Borlase?" she said, and added, in a cant phrase of the moment, "Fancy meeting you! Philip has gone across to the tobacco shop. Well, I *am* pleased to see you."

Stanton's eyes thanked her. His need of sympathy was tempting him. "I am awfully glad, too," he said. "I haven't seen a soul for a week! You know I've left the—the shop?"

"Yes. Philip told me," she replied. "What a funny arrangement!"

The arrangement had seemed to Stanton, one may divine, almost anything but humourous. "It's rather hard lines though, isn't it, Mrs. Wicksted?" he said.

Mrs. Wicksted sniffed; her private abhorrence of Mr. Borlase, for all her polite dissembling, was no secret. "For the matter of that," Stanton continued, with a weak smile, "I suppose I must—er—say good-bye—run away, you know. My—Mr. Borlase told me I was not to communicate with any one in the shop; and I don't want to get Wicksted into a row."

That gentleman's spouse sniffed again; it is an unmannerly practice, but not without expressiveness. "I'm not Philip," she remarked un-

dutifully; "and I'm not in the shop. I daresay," she added, with implication, "that he has his eyes everywhere" (and it was not of Mr. Wicksted's eyes that she was evidently speaking); "but I believe this is a free country. And Philip always says, 'outside of the shop,' he says, 'I'm my own master, and those who give me orders in the shop,' he says, 'can keep their orders to themselves. My house is my own.' And you can put *that* in your pipe and smoke it, Mr. Stanton Borlase," she concluded with kindly severity, which left him the intimation that he would find that house ever so hospitably open to him if he chose to call. She even explicitly invited him to do so. "Look here," she said, "no one can throw it in his face that Philip asked you; but you just come quietly round in half an hour—and no one the wiser—and have dinner with *me*. Philip—" Wicksted had come up, and she hurriedly finished her sentence before he could take Stanton's hand, standing between the two men as she spoke. "Philip! You know very well you mustn't speak to Mr. Borlase; go away. I've asked him to come to dinner—with *me*. *You* will be there," she added with her subtlest look, "if you like; you aren't obliged to come if you don't like. For all *I* know you may be goin' out. You haven't asked anyone. It's *me*. See?" The dear woman endeavoured, rather unsuccessfully, to wink.

"Oh, I say you know," said Wicksted, shaking hands cordially with Stanton in spite of her. "That's too clever. But you *will* come, won't you, Borlase? Just as well not to stand jawing

here," he admitted, with a furtive glance around him; "but you come round on the quiet. Damn it," he added, "a man's house is his castle after all, and I've a perfect legal right to ask whom I please!"

"Don't I tell you you haven't asked anyone?" Mrs. Wicksted protested. "It's me. They can't sack me—now—thank goodness!" And her mind, perhaps, strayed back to the time when she could be, and had been, dismissed—friendless and at midnight,—from the employment of Borlase & Company, which is written in another place, and is not a pleasant story.

"I wish awfully I could come," said Stanton. "I should be glad of your advice, Wicksted, though apparently I oughtn't to have it. But I don't think I can come."

"You haven't been made to pledge yourself not to, have you?" Philip asked gravely.

"Not exactly that," said Stanton, wavering. "Only I'm afraid—if anything came out, don't you know—you see?"

"Oh, skittles," said Wicksted heartily. "We're not slaves. It's ten times riskier, standing here. You come, old chap. I don't care what's said. Come. And go now—see?"

And Stanton, his need too great perhaps for his consciousness of his friend's danger, agreed. He shook hands ceremoniously with both, raised his hat again to Mrs. Wicksted, and walked briskly away, looking nervously on all sides as he went. For always in the background of his consciousness the vast personality of Mr. Borlase implacably threatened.

CHAPTER XII

THE WICKSTEDS AT HOME

MR. and Mrs. Wicksted walked home together in an unaccustomed silence. For them also there was always this dominant figure threatening in the background. It is to misconceive almost grossly the parts of master and servant, to think of their relation, in the economist's jargon, as a contract, mutual and free. The mere power of arbitrary dismissal under which he labours makes the unskilled man a slave. It is with quite possible starvation that his offences can be visited; and his fears are in direct ratio to his station. The Wicksteds had a home, furniture, an interest in life, and wages above the ordinary emolument of shop-folk. It lay within the possibilities of Mr. Borlase's anger to deprive them of all these things; for the slow search for fresh work would eat up their home, and end, at the best, very likely in a greatly inferior employment. Little wonder that they were grave, as they walked, flouting this giant power—little wonder, indeed, if fear had proved stronger than their kindliness.

But in their tiny sitting-room—bordered on one side by shelves of Philip's making, where his well-thumbed books were ranged, a curious

medley of cheap editions and second-hand *trouvailles*—they spoke. Before Philip could lay aside hat and walking-stick, his wife threw her arms round his neck, and kissed him hard on the mouth. Then, with her hands still clasped behind him, she looked tenderly and proudly into his eyes. “Oh, Phil! I love you!” she said, and was understood. He patted her plump arm soothingly and with reassurance. “Why, who’s to know?” he said.

“Oh, Phil! I knew it was all right to ask him!” she exclaimed.

“Of course, of course,” he answered gravely, holding her. “It was just like you. I don’t know—if there’s any fault, Edie, it’s mine. Perhaps I ought to have thought more of you—of the risk for you I mean—and put him off. It would press so hard on you, old girl, if—if anything happened. But I love you for wanting to have him!”

“And do you think I don’t love you for letting him come?” she cried, passionately. “Phil, I’d rather starve with you than have you different. Think, Phil! If you hadn’t been brave—my brave Phil!—just as you always are, we’d never have had each other at all!”

“No, no, old girl! It’s you that were brave,” he said. “It’s always worse for you. I could have shifted, easy enough, in those days. It wasn’t like now, when I’ve got a position in a hundred.”

“And I’d chance it a hundred times, before I’d have you different!” she said, and kissed

him again. "Come, let me go, you great spoon, and get dinner ready!"

He gave her another little hug before he would release her, and patted her arm again. "Eh? What's the time?" he said. "Past one. Well, I'll go and get the beer." And he put his soft hat on the back of his head and went out again, with a white jug.

Mrs. Wicksted laid dinner in this same sitting-room, honouring their guest, and sent her husband, presently, to the baker's for the joint—by the back-door because Stanton had arrived in the meantime. "You must excuse us, Mr. Borlase, for a few minutes," she said. "We poor people have to do our own work, you know!" Thus, it was only when they sate down to table, and Philip was "carving," that Stanton found opportunity to apologise for what his reflections in the meantime had displayed to him in the light of a rather selfish temerity.

"You know I'm ashamed of myself for being here," he said, in his timid way. "I've no right to involve you in danger, Wicksted. I oughtn't to have come."

"That be hanged," said Wicksted, who had just come to the end of his work, and was passing his plate for cabbage. "And please don't say any more about it, or I shall think you're sorry you *have* come. Besides," he added, touching his wife's hand, and giving it a little squeeze of intelligence as he said so, "we get a good deal of pleasure from your company—and some more besides."

"What do you mean?" Stanton inquired, looking from one to the other.

"Oh, don't pay any attention to Phil's nonsense," said Mrs. Wicksted; "he's always gammoning." But Stanton saw them look into each other's eyes, and, perhaps, had some intuition of the happy mystery they hid from him.

Stanton's position; why he was "turned away;" and in what, if in anything, he had offended his guardian, had been a subject of discussion all the week; one hates oneself for thinking that perhaps this natural curiosity had its part in making Mrs. Wicksted accost him that morning. She had her own inferences and intuitions on the subject. "Depend upon it," the admirable woman had said to her husband, "depend upon it, the old beast finds it doesn't suit his book to have a sharp young man like that about the place. *He'd see too much.*" It was in terms of such reprehensible disrespect that Mrs. Wicksted only too often had occasion to refer to her former patron.

"Oh, nonsense. Fiddle-de-dee, there's nothing to know that he hasn't known long ago."

"I don't know so much about that," said Edith mysteriously; "nor," she added with fresh obscurity, "do you either. Mark my words." It was a theory of this sort—for which very likely Mrs. Wicksted's recollections may, as she implied, have furnished more ample grounds than her husband's—that confronted Stanton, more or less tacitly, in Edith's questions at dinner time. He related his last conversation with

Mr. Borlase, and treated that pillar of society, I am bound to tell you, with a very judicial fairness. "It's awfully hard on a chap," he said. "But I'm sure the governor meant it for my good. He has the rummiest notions, don't you know!"

"Good for you to be turned out into the world, without a soul to speak to, eh?" said Stanton's militant hostess, incredulously.

"Because *he* had had to make his own way, don't you see," Stanton explained.

"And tried to prevent you picking up a word or hint from them that could give you a tip?"

"It's part of the system, I suppose," said poor Stanton—obliged, as it seemed, to apologise for his own wrongs.

"I don't like Mr. Borlase's ideas of what's good for people," Mrs. Wicksted snapped out; "and I don't care—no, Phil, I won't shut up—I don't care who knows it, so there!" The last words were spoken in difficulties, Wicksted, who had risen to carry out the last of the plates, having put his hand across her mouth. She followed her husband to the kitchen, again apologising for the guest's momentary isolation. Thus it was only when Wicksted had brought out a pipe and tobacco, that Stanton's doings of the past week came into discussion. There was in fact another delay. Stanton, as one of his economies, had given up smoking; but Wicksted insisted on rolling him a cigarette in paper provided by cutting up the protecting tissue before the frontispiece of a book of poems.

Then did Stanton tell the story of his search for lodgment and work; and Wicksted, puffing at a vast brier, cross-questioned him with some keenness before he offered comment. He even was at the trouble of silencing Edith's imminent indignation as certain figures were named. At the end, however, and when his questions had already conveyed to Stanton a frequent disapproval, he said, gravely:

"You're being swindled, old chap. That rent is out of all reason; and I wager the rooms were always let furnished."

"As for 'attendance,' I never heard of such a thing," added Mrs. Wicksted, with difficulty restrained up to now. "Furnished lodgings always include attendance."

"Ye—es. I'm afraid you've been a little too easy-going," said Wicksted.

"Another thing," interrupted his wife. "I should like to know what she gives you for breakfast. Boiled tea and dripping, I shouldn't wonder."

"I get my breakfast at a coffee shop," said Stanton, mildly.

"What! And pay that rent?" Mrs. Wicksted's indignation broke out afresh. "The woman ought to be put in gaol," she decided. "I'd fetch a policeman to her if *I* were in your shoes."

"Oh, nonsense, my dear," said Philip, who numbered a certain appetite for the science of jurisprudence among his many incongruous tastes. "It isn't illegal to charge too much rent—else where would the Irish landlords be?"

"All the same, I'd fetch one," said Mrs. Wicksted with conviction—still, presumably, meaning a policeman. "I'd just teach 'em a lesson," she said, regarding the invocation of the law as vaguely punitive in itself.

"No. Your remedy is to get out," said Wicksted; "and find a decent place. Eight bob a week ought to give you a furnished room and your breakfast. If you go the right way about it, you ought to get an egg or a kipper, at that. Try Dussex Street, or some of those places in Walworth; and don't choose a slatternly house; it won't be any cheaper for that. Go and look at a lot of 'em; they can't eat you. It's their *business* to show their rooms. And make 'no extras' a feature of the bargain, whatever you do—else you'll have sixpence a week for this, sixpence for that, and goodness knows what all. Look here—if you don't mind my saying so—you're a little too tender about sticking up for yourself. You must *kick*. Don't put up with just everything. It don't pay in this wicked world."

"What notice must I give where I am?" inquired Stanton.

"If it was *me*, I shouldn't give any notice at all, after the way you've been done," said Wicksted; "but," he added, with a kindly understanding of the lad's timidity, "perhaps you'll be more comfortable if you tell her when you get in to-night that you'll leave on Saturday. It'll save you a row, most likely."

"Oh, she isn't the sort of woman to make a

row," said Stanton, the inexperienced. "She always seems anxious to be obliging."

"I wouldn't be too sure," said Wicksted, laughing. "These people pretty soon alter their tone when they see there's no more to be got out of you. But you stick up for yourself. That's my advice to you."

And it was, indeed, with a full determination to "stick up" for himself that Stanton presently went home, and communicated his intentions to Mrs. Smithers in the passage.

"Oh, indeed?" said that lady, bridling, when he had done so. "Well, I must say as I didn't look for this, Mr. Stanton. Though," she added, moralising, as it appeared, on life in general, "it's no more than one looks for after putting oneself out for anyone—especially being a pore widow, with no one, of course, to say a word." Stanton felt, as he was intended to feel, like a rather ill-behaved ogre.

"I'm sorry," he said, "if I hurt your feelings, Mrs. Smithers; but you see I've got my own pocket to consider, and the fact is that I can see I've got to spend less money. Otherwise," he weakly concluded, "of course, I shouldn't think of giving you notice."

"No; of course, one doesn't look for nothing else," Mrs. Smithers repeated implacably. "Blessed," she added; "is them that expects nothink is my motter. From next Saturday, I suppose, Mr. Stanton."

"*To* next Saturday," Stanton corrected her, set, in Wicksted's phrase, on "sticking up" for himself. "I understand that is usual."

“Usual?” said Mrs. Smithers with indignation. “Usual? Indeed, in *my* little bit of experience, being as is natural to a pore widow woman, with no protectors, I *presume* a little older than you, sir—in *my* experience a week is a week, and I *don’t* think as Sunday evenin’ is Saturday night; and a week’s notice, accordin’ to my ’umble opinion, *is* a week’s notice.”

“You forget, however,” said Stanton, who had turned very red, but who was fortified in this argument by the recollection of some remarks by Wicksted, “that I didn’t come in until Tuesday night, and that you charged me for a full week. Consequently, I could give you notice on Tuesday, if I wished.”

“W’ich in *my* young days,” said Mrs. Smithers, who now positively towered in her wrath, “in them days, Mr. Stanton, a week begun on a Saturday. I’ve no doubt, wot with schoolbores and things, as all that is altered now; but howsumever, Mr. Stanton, I shall thank you not to remove your goods until you have paid me a week’s notice *or* a week’s rent *from* next Saturday, *or* I’ll be obliged to put the law into motion. *And* I shall thank you, sir, for my week’s rent and attendance for this week, accordin’ to arrangement.”

“I’ve no objection,” said Stanton, taking out his purse; “though for that matter, I don’t recollect any such——”

“Did you, or did you not, insist on paying of a deposit for to secure my room,” interrupted Mrs. Smithers, raising her voice. “Did you, or

did you not, engage my rooms, Mr. Stanton? Answer me *that*, if you please. An' very glad at the time, I must say, to come into the comfortable, clean apartments, with all the comforts of an 'ome, w'ich now you think proper to throw in my face."

Stanton hastily thrust the money into her hand—he providentially had some change this time—and fled incontinently upstairs, followed by reproaches that brought the other lodgers to their doors to gape at him as he passed. He was hot, disgusted with his own weakness, ashamed and abashed by the landlady's indignant protests, notwithstanding that he knew himself very well in the right, and on all grounds inconceivably wretched. He was determined, however, come what might, to leave on Saturday, and he foresaw a worse rating then; he viewed with dismay the prospect of what her sharp tongue, alternating pathos and anger, might have in store for him, every morning, when she should "do" his room.

As to this, he might have spared himself some anxiety. Mrs. Smithers having obtained in advance, with the rent, her additional extortion for "attendance," troubled him no more with her presence, and whatever cares—down to the meanest—were bestowed on his room that week, were the work of Stanton's own hands. He sought, where Wicksted had advised, fresh lodgings, and after visiting several houses, and discovering the experience, after all, not so dreadful as it had seemed, found at the lower end

of Dussex Street a clean, plainly furnished room, which the woman of the house was quite ready to keep for him until Saturday. She was, indeed, a rosy-cheeked, full-breasted creature, the mother of a tribe of children, whose presence did not make it easier to keep her rooms occupied. Seven-and-sixpence a week, all told, covered the rent of this room, high up over steep stairs, on the condition that Stanton should take his breakfast in the kitchen to save work. "And a matter of a button that wants sewing on—I know what young men are—" said Mrs. Bonnington, "you bring to me when I've got time, and I'll do what I can for you. Deposit? Law, no! Not with your face, my boy. What are you doing alone in the world? Got no father and mother?"

Stanton shook his head. "I'll tell you about it some day," he said.

"Tell me anything you like, my dear, and when you like," said the landlady. "You're not the first young gentleman as I've taken in an' done for—not by a many dozen," and she laughed knowingly, twisting a thin wedding ring.

Stanton went away, a good deal lighter in heart than he had come. Mrs. Bonnington's blunt kindness rang truer than the other woman's unctuous protestations had done, easily as he had been taken in by them. He felt that at last, with a welcome amendment in his budget, he had fallen into safe hands, where the dis-

tasteful duty of "sticking up" for himself was not likely to be required of him.

And thereafter, to his happier mood, a fresh solace offered itself. Keenly regretting them, he could hardly look to be a frequent visitor of the Wicksteds; and indeed he had determined, in his own mind, small as the danger was of some spy carrying the story of his visits there to Mr. Borlase, to go to their house no more, on any insistence, however hospitable. But it suddenly occurred to him, that if there were possible risk in his going to them, their peril in coming to him would be practically nothing. And in this sudden revelation, he wrote in haste to the Wicksteds, proposing that they should visit him, in his new abode, next Sunday evening.

CHAPTER XIII

BETTER, ALL ROUND

THAT further strife of words to which Stanton looked forward, not without some amount of pusillanimous apprehension, as Saturday drew nearer, did not after all occur. For Friday had seen a catastrophe—a descent of Fates which, as the poor and unprotected widow she so often called herself, Mrs. Smithers had a just right to resent. The god out of the machine was none other than that lost protector so often deplored by his supposititious relict. Mr. Smithers, in fact, rose from the dead, with his hair cut short, and an unassuageable thirst for strong waters. There were high words below stairs as early as the forenoon; on Saturday morning the tempest which was raging when he passed through the street door made Stanton very glad that his appointments with possible employers were likely to keep him abroad until after noon.

And when at length he did return, to pack and resolutely cord-up his box, Mrs. Smithers, so far from being fortified to a fresh insistence on the rights she had previously maintained, by the resurrection of her dead, allowed him to depart without comment; and by five o'clock he was safely installed in Mrs. Bonnington's top room. On invitation, he presently took tea with that

lady and her children—Mr. Bonnington himself, a working silversmith of subdued manners, hardly appeared to come into any other category. Stanton almost expected to see him taken upstairs to bed with the Bonnington offspring, when later on the time arrived. He was, however, merely bidden to “clean” himself, ready to go out with Mrs. Bonnington to market, Stanton, who had already ingratiated himself with the smaller children, volunteering to give an ear to them in the parental absence.

It was on his own proposition, modestly advanced, that he received the meals on Sunday with his hosts, at the modest expense of a shilling. “Whenever you like, my dear,” said Mrs. Bonnington—she called everyone “my dear,” except her husband, to whom she always alluded and spoke by his unassisted surname—“only name it to me overnight, before Bonnington and me goes marketing, whether you are goin’ to stay in a-Sunday or not. It’s no ill-convenience either way; and a shilling won’t break you—nor make me, for that matter—when you do come down.”

Wicksted, who, with Edith, arrived on Sunday evening after tea, pronounced the opinion that Stanton had “fallen on his feet” this time.

“You’ll do here,” he said. “Eh, Edie?”

“Yes, from what you say,” she replied, glancing round the room—a sitting-room on the first floor which happened to be vacant, and which Mrs. Bonnington had insisted on Stanton’s using, when she learned that he expected friends.

The garret which was his own had already been inspected and approved of, and Stanton's financial arrangements had likewise been discussed, in the whisper somehow considered proper to such conversations.

"But how are you getting on with regard to a job?" Wicksted asked; and Stanton's face fell while he admitted that the only interviews of the week which had not culminated in explicit rejection, had left him nothing better than vague promises that he should "hear from" the interviewed in case of his services being required.

"I am afraid," he said; "that there isn't much chance for me. To tell you the truth I don't know what to do. What with one thing and another, I've got through the best part of five pounds already; and *that* won't do, you know. What do you advise me to do?"

"Hum. I hardly know," said Wicksted. "You see the difficulty is, that you've no *especial* qualification; there's nothing, I mean, that in any particular way you can be said to know. Consequently you have to take your chance with a hundred others; you can only trust to good luck. If you had any especial experience, you see, it might help."

"I might try to get a crib behind the counter somewhere, in our line," he suggested. "I know something of that."

"Oh, Lord! don't try that while there's a gutter to sweep or a horse to hold. You know the hell it is!"

"No, I wouldn't go back to those nasty shops

if I were you," said Mrs. Wicksted. "They dry the blood up out of young men, with the gas, and the close air, and the bad food. Do you know what one of the girls said to me, when I first went out?—I was a country girl, you know, and had the appetite of three shop-girls. 'Ah,' she said to me, 'you won't want so much to eat presently,' she said; 'and you'll soon lose your high colour,' she said. I was thought rather nice-looking then, Mr. Borlase—at least some people pretended to think so." She turned, an expressive pair of brown eyes on her husband as she spoke, lest the high subtlety of this reminiscence should make it too difficult of comprehension. Philip pinched her cheek. "I think so still," he said gallantly. Stanton walked with discretion to the window and back.

"No; no shops if you can help it," Edith said again, putting her bonnet straight. "They eat up body and soul!"

"But all shops are not the same," Stanton objected. Mrs. Wicksted, as usual, took refuge in nasal inspiration.

"No easier to find a counter billet than a desk billet," said her husband; "and a sight worse pay. No. You've been to school. Chance your luck a while longer, and try to do better than counter-jumping. You're a cut above that."

"But I don't seem to make much progress," Stanton complained.

"You can't make progress until you get a job," said the logical Wicksted.

"I know; but I mean to say, I don't seem any nearer to getting a situation."

"But, good Lord! How long have you been looking for one? A fortnight, call it. It isn't a fortnight yet. You don't expect billets to drop from the clouds as soon as you open your mouth to receive them, do you?" asked Wicksted, with a slight confusion of similes. "Wait till you've been three months on the look-out, and then you *may* say something."

"And in the meantime my twenty pounds will be gone," said Stanton dolefully. "Can't you give me any tips as to how to go about it?"

"I don't know," said Wicksted uneasily, looking at his wife, who for once avoided his eyes. They had, in fact, discussed certain of Stanton's deficiencies as a candidate—deficiencies already but too obvious to ourselves. "Let's see," continued Wicksted, weakly deferring the real point. "What sort of letter do you write?"

Stanton took from his pocket a folded half-sheet of note-paper. "That's what I say, as a rule," he said, blushing a little. "I—I alter it you know according to circumstances, if the advertisement says anything to guide me. I don't put it always just like that." The weakness of his attack seemed suddenly to eclipse everything else, now that his draft letter was under Wicksted's critical eyes. Edith had got up and was looking over her husband's shoulder, her plump cheek close to his ear.

"There's nothing much the matter with that," Philip pronounced at last. "You could always

write a good letter, you know. But to be frank with you—between friends, don't you know—I think if there's anything the matter with you, you most likely don't give a good impression when you get sent for. How many of your letters fetch an appointment—what proportion, I mean to say?"

"Nearly all that I expect answers from now," said Stanton. "I didn't get so many at first, and this letter is the result of a fortnight's trials, you see. I amended the first letter I used to write, as I went along—see?"

"Just shows what you were saying," Edith murmured to her husband.

"You see it isn't the letter; so it must be you, you see," Wicksted continued bravely. Stanton, abashed, looked anywhere but in his friends' faces. "You don't speak up for yourself. You're educated three times better than the chaps you compete with—Board Schools brats, most of 'em. Your appearance is all right—clothes cut properly and all that. But you don't think enough of yourself. You don't stick up to the people, if you know what I mean."

"They're so beastly stuck-up themselves," said poor Stanton. "They sit on a fellow so. I always feel such a fool, and I'm afraid of seeming a worse one."

"What's it matter?" asked Wicksted. "If you don't get the billet, you never see 'em again. If you *do* get it, it's worth a few minutes' embarrassment. They can't bite you."

"They can sit on you awfully," said Stanton

again. "I've been snubbed to death this week."

"Let 'em snub," said Wicksted. "You're none the worse afterwards, and it'll be all the same a hundred years hence"—an irrelevant consideration which has failed to console others, before Stanton Borlase. "You've got," pursued the relentless Wicksted, who knew very well that he was worrying his friend horribly, but, being no cruel-kind sentimentalist, pressed the probe home—"you've got to overcome that bashfulness of yours. Speak up for yourself. It doesn't *pay* to be frightened."

He was, unconsciously, playing the game of Stanton's guardian. Could Mr. Borlase have overheard this conversation, it is possible that he might almost have condoned the flouting of his commands.

"*Paris vaut bien une messe*," continued Wicksted, whose closely limited acquaintance with the tongue of modern Gaul was the source of a very naïve pride to his pretty wife. "It's worth while putting up with a little unpleasantness—which is nothing at all, the moment you've taken the plunge. A decent man doesn't snub you; if one, here and there, is a snob, you're a better man than he is, that's all."

"You don't think enough of yourself, Mr. Borlase." Edith repeated her husband's words. Philip interrupted her:

"You've got a sound education, and a good ref.," he said. "You've been better brought up than nine out of ten of the fellows that are after these jobs, and your looks are in your

favour. I'll tell you another thing. Always stare the beggars in the face; they'll always treat you better when you do that! I learnt it long ago."

"There's so much competition for every crib," said Stanton again, gloomily; "and any amount of Germans in the market."

"Fiddle," said Wicksted, succinctly. "Decent houses don't employ these foreign rats, who work for nothing and try to starve everyone. It's well known they're not cheap in the end."

"Do you think I'm asking too much?" Stanton suggested.

"What *do* you ask?"

"I've come down to fifteen shillings, now," said Stanton. "In fact, I generally tell them I'll come for what anyone else will come for. Half a loaf, you know."

"A mistake," said Wicksted. "You'll do no good by undervaluing yourself. Stick out for fifteen bob. It will be time enough to accept less if they offer it to you. And above all," he concluded, as he rose to go, "think as much of yourself as you can, and look 'em straight in the eye."

Stanton, as he lay trying to sleep that night, endeavoured to make up his mind that he *would* respect himself, in future. The effort, when he hurried to town, in response to letters which had come by Saturday night's post, was to make him appear *gauche* and rather cheeky in his first interviews. But he watched himself intelligently, and noted his own errors. He found, too, as

Wicksted had predicted, that when he cultivated his own self-respect, he was treated with more consideration by the men who sent for him; and that, after all, even when he was snubbed, the effect of the humiliation wore off after an hour's reflection. In short, curt words broke no bones. He was already getting a little toughened—nervous, bashful, and very ready to blush, still; but decidedly more of a man. His letters, as Wicksted had approvingly discovered, were good ones, and he had soon been obliged to relegate their inditement to the evening, his days being mostly occupied in keeping appointments. He was even sometimes compelled to choose between some which overlapped.

On Saturday morning his hopes rose high. He got a second summons from a merchant who had sent him away last week with a promise that he should be sent for if required.

It turned out that one or two other candidates for the position and emolument of a clerkship at fifty pounds a year had likewise been bidden to return for further questioning, and Stanton found himself on a sort of anxious-bench with three or four rivals, awaiting the result of an interview which was being undergone by a first comer. In turn, each was sent for, and in due course returned to the seat of aspiration. Stanton's turn at length came—he was the last candidate to be seen.

After he had answered a number of questions, and successfully solved a sum in "practice" proposed for his experimentation, he, too, was bid-

den to wait, while the chief clerk was conferred with. He took his place, looking furtively at the other young men, who sate in attitudes of various embarrassment and discomfort. His hands were damp with nervous perspiration; his heart beat so hard that he could feel it almost shaking his arm. He compared himself furtively, and to his disadvantage, with each of his rival suitors, and pulled a button off his waistcoat in his fidgetty agitation.

At length the door opened. The amount of consideration expended in this choice was of good omen, if Stanton had only known it, for the character of the employment. A good house takes pains not to admit a doubtful confidant. As the chief clerk came out, the blood rushed to Stanton's face and he rose, almost faint with anxiety. The clerk called out a name which was not Stanton's. "Mr. Renfrew has chosen this young man," he said, indicating the candidate who had been thus signalled. "We are sorry to have kept you all so long waiting, and I wish you better luck next time."

Ill, and feeling sick, Stanton turned away without speaking. The other young men said, "Good morning, sir," and filed out. He was hungry—for it was nearly two o'clock now—but too wretched to eat. He walked over London Bridge, and reached home, riding in a crowded tramway-car, as quickly as he could. Arrived, he locked his door and threw himself on his bed, to bury his face in the pillow in a sort of dull unconsciousness even of his own despair. The

whole world seemed empty of all but disappointment. Mrs. Bonnington, who presently came up with a letter, had to knock three or four times and finally call through the keyhole, enquiring if he were ill, before he heard her.

He opened the door and took the letter.

"Why, Mr. Stanton, you're not well—you've been crying," she exclaimed; the good woman had none of the reticences. "What's the matter?"

"I thought I'd got work, and I haven't; that's all," he said. "It's nothing. It doesn't matter." Pride was coming to his rescue.

"Well, here's a letter," said the landlady. "Perhaps that's better news."

"No. Only another disappointment, I'll bet," said Stanton bitterly, throwing the letter on his wet pillow.

"Never say die," said Mrs. Bonnington. "It's always darkest before the sun comes out. Open it, like a man!"

He went to the bed and tore the letter open. It was typewritten and brief; he had mastered it in a moment. His face worked strangely.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Bonnington.

"It's—it's a week on trial anyway," he stammered, trembling all over.

"What did I tell you?" cried the landlady. He staggered forward. She took his face in her warm hands and kissed him heartily on the cheek. "Well done!" she cried.

But Stanton's strength was gone. He stumbled and almost fell; the good woman caught

him in her arms, and he sobbed like a baby on her large bosom.

The letter (which was from a firm he had visited the day before) requested his presence at nine o'clock on Monday morning, for a week's trial, at a pound a week. It was signed, "Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender."

CHAPTER XIV

EMPLOYMENT

IN selecting Stanton for the vacancy in his office, Mr. Douglas, who was the only active partner in the firm, had been influenced as well by the intuitions to which he rather often confided such decisions, as by his habitual attitude towards his staff. He admitted a responsibility. It was his choice to make work for the house of Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender a desirable thing. He regarded the duty of employment as, in some sort, a trust, whereof he saw himself the administrator, and, with a larger benevolence than that of many who call themselves philanthropists, it was in his fine morality to think himself bound to use his high position in the mercantile world to the advantage of as many people as possible. This did not hinder him from being a shrewd man of business and a keen judge of men; he was not in the least blind to the fact that his indulgences were often abused. Like the confessor in the ballad, old heads upon young shoulders he did not expect to find; and if his offices were sometimes conferred on undeservers, he knew too well how to safeguard larger interests, to let his partners suffer. Enforced occasion could make him severe; but he excused error, and even care-

lessness, with much compassion, sensible that his displeasure was in itself punishment.

This same gift of sympathy prompted his keen questioning of Stanton, and enabled him to divine, beneath the lad's excessive shyness and lack of nerve, the excellent qualities latent in him. He had elicited something of the candidate's position; he read in his tone and the eager anxiety of his eyes the unusual difficulties which his temperament would be likely to throw in his way, when seeking work. Exactly the timidity which spoiled Stanton's chances with other prospective employers, gained him a position with Mr. Douglas; and it was something of his own sense of duty to the dependents of the firm that the latter tried to convey to his son as they smoked their last cigars together on Sunday night. Stanton, as it happened, was the first applicant whom Mr. Douglas had sent for—he made it a point to take entirely upon himself the trouble, rarely occurring, of engaging new men. As soon as he had talked with Stanton and made out his position and character, he decided to let him fill the vacancy; a reply from Mr. Borlase, Stanton's referee, was all he had waited for before communicating his decision in the letter which rescued the lad from the despair in which he had thrown himself on his bed the previous day.

“I have sent word, Edmund,” said Mr. Douglas, leaning forward in his long arm-chair, “to that young man, John Stanton, whom I saw on

Friday. He is to come for a week's trial to-morrow morning."

"Oh, very good," Edmund replied. "Do you want me to set him to work?"

"Well, perhaps you'd better let him wait until I come," said Mr. Douglas thoughtfully. "You know," he added, looking with unreal curiosity at the ash of his cigar, "what Mr. Schneider is. His fur may be stroked the wrong way if I don't hand the boy over to him personally in the first instance; and things might be made disagreeable, which I don't want. He's a rather timid boy, Ned; I fancy he may have lost his parents lately—you noticed that he was dressed in black?—and that he had been used to a certain amount of protection; do you see?"

"In what way do you mean that he is timid?" Edmund asked. Timidity, if it interfered with a person being set to work to the best advantage, appeared to him a vice that ought to be corrected as soon as possible, and with such sternness as might be requisite.

"I mean that he hasn't much 'push,'" said Mr. Douglas. "He could be easily made very unhappy if the others chose to send him to Coventry; and he would let himself be bullied to almost any extent before he would assert himself. I'm going to pay him a pound a week to begin with; but I shall increase it at the first decent opportunity. He needs money evidently, from what I managed to get out of him, though he was rather well dressed. I fancy that suit is about the last of his mourning." Mr. Douglas

did not add, what he knew, that some twelve pounds constituted the whole of Stanton's capital.

"It's plenty for a beginner, isn't it?" Edmund suggested, referring to the wage propounded by his father. "He hasn't had much experience—judging from his looks."

"I don't believe he has had any, of our sort," said Mr. Douglas. "But" (with a smile), "he'll have the less to unlearn. And a pound is little enough, after all, for a young man who has to feed and clothe himself out of it. He's not likely to save a great deal." Mr. Douglas liked his clerks to be provident. It was his view that a little money standing between a man and penury imparted self-respect, and did no harm to his usefulness. He had no wish to trade on the dependence of his clerks; he preferred to make their employment desirable by a just and wisely-moderated liberality.

"So let him wait—give a message to Mr. Schneider, rather, to tell him to wait—until I come," he added. "I shall ask Schneider"—Mr. Douglas never *ordered* anything to be done—"to turn him over to you to learn his duties. I wish you to keep him busy as far as you can, and have him under your own eye. Don't let Lucraft teach him to be idle."

The young man named would probably have been a good deal surprised if, by any strange chance, he could have overheard this last remark. His readily exhibited preoccupation when Mr. Douglas happened to pass his desk,

and his sudden skill in falling, without change of tone, into the discussion of some business matter, when he was caught talking to Peters or Thurlow, extorted the admiring astonishment of those worthies, and in his own felicitous opinion could not possibly be unsuccessful in deceiving his employer. It has already been conveyed to you, however, that Mr. Douglas knew much more of office politics than his young men suspected. Indeed, even Edmund himself was often astonished to find how much his father had observed. He was no tale-bearer, but many things came under his observation which he was glad to find his father noticing.

Consequently, after the delays created by the procedure Mr. Douglas had ordained, Stanton was set to work to index some letter-books, a labour considerably left for the expected newcomer by Mr. Peters, who had taken advantage of the "busy" state of affairs to neglect this duty for some ten days.

That laborious individual found leisure, notwithstanding, to hear Lucraft's comments on the apprentice (as he called him) when Schneider had gone to the bank. Edmund was engaged in examining some correspondence with Miss Chippendale.

"Here's another Johnny come to undermine Mr. Schneider's position," Lucraft observed, looking sideways at Stanton, who, feverishly anxious to acquit himself successfully during his week of probation, was indexing for dear life.

"What do you make of him?" asked Peters,

with a snigger. "He seems in a deuce of a hurry."

"New brooms," said Lucraft sagely. "I'll just turn him over and see what he's made of. I don't think he is a sneak; but he mustn't spoil things."

He therefore crossed with his silent step to where Stanton was working, and looked over his shoulder. "Getting along rather fast, aren't you?" he inquired critically.

"I hope so, sir," said Stanton, who had as yet no means of judging anyone's position, and was anxious to show respect to all who might merit that demonstration.

"You know," said Lucraft sagaciously, "that the governor is very particular about his books—about everything in fact. He'd always prefer that anyone should take a little longer over a job, and do it neatly."

Stanton reddened, and in marking off the reference figures on the thin paper of the letter-book with his blue pencil, took pains to write them with greater precision than he had employed before. The early pages of the book, marked in Peter's slapdash hand, had led him to suppose speed a chief consideration. He turned back two or three pages and mended some of his figures. Lucraft took the book from the desk and threw open the index, that he might scrutinise Stanton's handwriting. Just then the door of the typewriting room opened, and Edmund came out. He looked keenly across the office, missed Lucraft from his place, and finding him at Stanton's elbow, asked:

"What's the matter, Lucraft? Want the letter-book?"

"No, sir," replied that worthy, without abashment. "Mr. Stanton couldn't quite make out a name, that's all. Yes, it is 'Johnson,'" he concluded, addressing the surprised Stanton. "You'll find several letters to that firm." Stanton, who had turned very red, made no reply. Lucraft trod on his toe. "Answer, can't you, you fool?" he whispered.

"Er—thank you, sir, I see now," said Stanton aloud, and Lucraft slipped back to his place.

"If you find any more difficulties, Stanton, please bring them to me," said Edmund, and walked over to his side. He looked at the open book. The letter was perfectly copied, and the name at the head of it was not Johnson. But he said nothing more. Stanton felt that he had been already detected in a deception and his hand shook nervously. Young Douglas, remembering his father's admonitions, laid his hand kindly on his shoulder. His rebuke was intended purely for Lucraft's benefit. "It's half-past twelve," he said. "You'd better go to your lunch," and he closed the letter-book with his own hand, wishing to convey that the incident was closed also. When he had seen Stanton leave the office he returned to the small room.

"He doesn't seem to know much," was Lucraft's comment, addressed in a whisper to Peters; "if you ask me, he's a bit of a Juggins. Still, he can learn—or he and I will fall out.

Gone to lunch," he remarked mischievously to Mr. Schneider, who had just bustled in and had addressed an interrogative glance, first to Stanton's desk, and then to Lucraft. "Mr. Edmund sent him," added Thurlow, who had kept quiet thus far. "I suppose the rest of us can fit our time to his," he added, taking his cue, as usual, from the book-keeper, who had "bridled" at once on this.

"Well, it wasn't the boy's fault, was it?" said Lucraft, who made no secret of his contempt for Thurlow. He had quite good nature enough to smooth the path of a newcomer, so long as he saw no danger of the latter violating the otiose tradition of the office, or coming between himself and young Douglas, with whom, however, his influence had of late declined.

But simultaneously, Miss Chippendale's brisk comradeship had developed in Edmund a marked respect for her rather censorious opinions; had he been anything of a moralist, or even the most casual student of character within and about himself—instead of being a quite ordinary and not objectionably clever young man from Oxford—he might have wondered how it had been conveyed to him that her opinion of Mr. Lucraft was decidedly unfavourable. For certainly he could have quoted no word of hers on the subject. His own studies in the art of shorthand—Miss Chippendale had a mental smile of bleak comprehension as she noted it—had been relaxed after a week or two, in favour of a fuller occupation of his time with actual

business. Edmund was at that stage of young manhood when strenuousness is the dominant note. He plunged into icy water at unseemly hours, that he might walk the five miles from home to office and yet arrive on the stroke of nine; and slept the sleep of the fully occupied at ten every night. "It's really a necessity to live out all one's time, don't you think," he had said once to Miss Chippendale; "life won't be so long that one can afford to waste many hours of it, physically or mentally."

Miss Chippendale cordially accepted this maxim; she even remembered and conveyed it to her brother, a sculptor of some genius, as she sate in his studio the next evening.

"H'm," said the latter through his beard—pausing to step backward and contemplate with head aslant the effect of a touch he had just added to the bust on his tripod. "I should think he is a bit of a prig."

"He isn't," she replied. "You always call anyone a prig who makes a sensible remark, Will."

"Do I?" replied the sculptor. "I didn't know it."

"Yes, you do," said his sister. "At least you always call my friends prigs."

"Do I?" he said again, aggravatingly. "Well, you're a bit of a prig yourself, perhaps, Mary."

"Am I?" she replied. "Well, I don't utter personal judgments about people I've never seen, anyway."

Chippendale laughed. "How awfully decent of you," he said. "Utter a personal judgment on a job you *have* seen. How do you think this is coming?"

The bust was the portrait of a young painter who, with Chippendale, formed part of an odd little community whereof Mary was by way of enjoying a sort of unofficial or semi-detached membership. She came around and looked at the bust critically. "It's coming along," she decided. "You've got the humour of his mouth rather well, I think. You oughtn't to touch that again."

"The lower part of the face isn't altogether finished," the sculptor grumbled.

"You'd better leave it, all the same," she said. "You'll take all the character out of it if you meddle. Personally, I'd rather see it left than spoiled by being worked up any further. How long has Dartring" (the original of the bust) "been gone?"

"He went out a moment before you came," said Chippendale. "I wonder you didn't meet him on the stairs. He's coming back to supper. Thinks he has got some black-and-white work for one of those magazines he sent to."

"Well, I hope he has," she said. "He needs it badly enough."

"In the absence of a settled and commercial talent, yes," said her brother. "Take your skirt out of that dish of plaster; you've no idea how bad petticoats are for wet plaster."

CHAPTER XV

BROTHER AND SISTER

WILLIAM CHIPPENDALE'S remark rankled a little in his sister's memory, and she came back upon it, later, before their friend came in and found them laying supper: for the Chippendales kept no servant, and it was a point of honour with the sculptor to do his share of the housework in their high lodging.

They had been reading most of the evening—or, rather, Will had been reading aloud, with frequent and scornful comment, some newspaper criticism on a picture show lately opened, while Mary darned the domestic stockings. When she put these aside, and her brother went down stairs for a jug of water—it was among their cheerful inconveniences that all water had to be fetched laboriously from the basement, four storeys down—she recalled and perpended his remark. Was Mr. Edmund Douglas a prig? Was she herself? She examined the matter, and when her breathless brother entered she had come to a conclusion upon it.

“Prig yourself!” she said, putting down the bread-board with a thump and going back to the cupboard for cheese.

“In connection with whose boots?” he inquired sweetly.

"With yours—which you might as well have cleaned while you were in the kitchen," she said.

"I'll do 'em, and yours, before I go to bed," he promised. "And — prig? I wish you wouldn't be so elliptical."

"For calling people names when you don't know them," she explained inconsequently.

"Oh, your young governor? Well, so he is," said Chippendale. "It's a positive impropriety to walk about breathing copybook in the way he does—by your own account."

"I didn't say anything of the kind," Mary protested. "All sensible remarks don't come out of copybooks, even if *you* haven't heard many of them since you left school."

"Not enjoying those advantages—" her brother began.

"Well?" she waited.

"Of which the benefits are so conspicuously perceived in yourself," he concluded, laughing. "Hallo, Dartring, what luck? Don't speak to Mary; she's venomous. She calls names."

Dartring, who had just come in, shook hands with her: a spare, shaggy-bearded man, in a Norfolk suit which looked as if the pockets of it had been contrived in order to save the wearer the inconvenience of carrying a portmanteau, so widely did they bulge with the miscellany they contained. "What's Bill been saying to you, Miss Chippendale?" he inquired.

"It isn't what I've been saying," said Chippendale, "it's what's been said to me. Mary

came home this afternoon oozing the proverbs of Solomon and several copybook makers."

"And then?" inquired Dartring judicially.

"Why, Mr. Dartring—" Mary began.

"Don't interrupt," said her brother. "Then, when she'd quoted several volumes of headlines from 'the safe guide to a good commercial handwriting,' I said the author was a prig."

Dartring looked bewildered—a predicament not surprising in the circumstances. "Will is merely talking nonsense," Mary assured him. "It isn't in the least serious. He will be quite rational if you lead him gently away from his little delusions. One of them is, that to make a remark which is in the least degree not commonplace, is to be of necessity a prig. But Will is quite harmless. Shield him from intelligent conversation and he's really quite an agreeable young sculptor."

"But come, come now, he is a bit of a prig, isn't he, Sis?" Chippendale inquired. "You implied as much yourself the other day."

"We are talking about my employer's son," Mary explained primly to Dartring, ignoring her brother. "He is a nice boy, just down from Oxford, with an Oxford accent that you could stick drawing pins into, but quite sensible—for his age." Mary's foible, if she had one, was her sense of maturity. "Will chooses to be funny about him, you understand."

"Oh, lucidity!" said Chippendale. "No one is allowed to laugh at Mary's acquaintances but herself."

"He isn't an acquaintance. He's a friend," she answered. "I like him very much. He'll make a man. Have you sold anything, Mr. Dartring?"

Chippendale struck across the question. "Ask him to tea, then, if he's a friend," he said.

"I can't do that, you know," Mary replied.

"Why not?"

"Well, it wouldn't be usual. He's my employer's son."

"Oh, I thought you said he was a friend of yours."

"You know very well I couldn't ask him to call," she replied. "He's not of our station."

Chippendale shrugged his shoulders. "A friend!" he said.

Mary turned to Dartring and repeated her inquiry. "Have you sold anything?"

"No answer as yet," said the painter. "These chaps are so long in making up their minds."

"It's very inconsiderate, then," said Mary, "when they're dealing with people like us. Come along: supper's ready." And they all sat down to the table.

"Diomed has an idea," said Dartring. "He's been seeing Potts of the *Paragon* about it to-day. To do some factories: instructive and amusing, don't you know; description of the process: work people at home, and so forth. If Potts decides to let him try it, I'm going to Staffordshire with him to make sketches."

"Potteries?" said Mary. "Well, it's abominable work: they use lead in the glaze, and the

people get horrible diseases—paralysed thumbs and teeth dropping out and all that.”

“Yes,” Dartring assented, “that’s it. He says it ought to be shown up.”

“Then Potts won’t let it happen,” said Chippendale sententiously. “He’s too much afraid of the advertising manager to say anything against the sacred cause of commerce.”

“Staffordshire doesn’t advertise,” said Dartring hopefully. “Besides, it isn’t confined to pottery. If we make a “go” of it we are to do all sorts of places: ironworks, dynamite factories, cotton mills and all that: *toute la lyre*. It isn’t an indignation series; it’s light, useless, interesting ‘information.’ You know the *Paragon* tradition: anything you like so long as it doesn’t require intelligence to read it. The Potteries come first, because there’s been a stir about them in the *Star* and such like; Potts indeed suggested Staffordshire because he thinks it is in the air.”

“Potts on Potteries,” said Chippendale. “Well, I hope Diomed will pitch it strong. Some of these factories are mere murder shops.”

“Porcelain’s no worse than plenty of other things,” said Mary. “And the cause of half the unhealthiness is that the workpeople won’t wash before they eat. Consequently, they swallow all sorts of poison with their food.”

“Admire the stunting effects of commercial spirit on the moral sense,” said Chippendale. “‘No worse than other things,’ to begin with; and then you go on to put all the blame on the

poor people. You might be a merchant prince, fattening on the blood of the worker, yourself, Mary."

"What nonsense!" she replied. "You can't stop the manufacture of porcelain; and if the workpeople are such fools or such infants that they won't take the trouble to care for their own health, they deserve to be ill."

"Very pretty; but they ought to be made to take precautions," said her brother. "Because they are ignorant and careless it is no reason why they should be allowed to kill themselves and beget unhealthy children, and then leave those children to starve."

"Don't you think you can carry that principle too far?" Dartring suggested. "If you are going to run about after grown men and women, to see that they don't injure themselves, you will soon teach them to think they *can't* be prudent for their own sakes."

"They can't," said Chippendale. "They've never been taught. They are herded into factories before they have time to get half-way through the smattering that passes for education, and they never learn anything afterwards."

"Then that's an argument for teaching the workpeople, but not one for abolishing the factories," said Mary, in her precise way. "Besides, commodities *must* be produced somehow."

"No one wants to abolish them," Chippendale threw back at her. "You know very well that china can be glazed without lead; only the safe process happens to be a little dearer, and,

consequently, the greed of the manufacturers and jobbers prevents them adopting it. The merchants could *insist* on the other process being employed, if they like, Mary. There isn't anyone who is engaged in the business that hasn't a share in the responsibility; I've said so before. I've no doubt paper mills are just as unhealthy, and if they are, your governor is responsible, and you are responsible, too, and your friend—the young governor—with his proverbs.”

“Paper mills are on the whole rather clean, wholesome places,” Mary replied. “There's so much water used and the work is so dependent upon perfect cleanliness that, in spite of chemical bleaches, the manufacture is rather a healthy one. However, that doesn't affect what we were saying. You can't make all manufactures healthy or beautiful. What you can do is to teach the workpeople to take care of themselves and make them do it; and if Mr. Diomed's article draws attention to the subject, he will have done something, while you and I have only been talking about it. And I should like to know who'll be a prig then.”

“Your young governor from Oxford will still be a prig,” said Chippendale. “‘Life is so short one can't afford to miss a moment of it,’” he quoted as he got up, laughing, and began to clear the supper table. Mary was able to laugh, too, now, as she rose to help him.

CHAPTER XVI

ENTER SMITH & PERKS

INQUIRERS—that is to say, shop-customers of a certain standing; the colleagues of Mr. Borlase's public life at the Vestry and elsewhere; and a few business acquaintances (it was always a characteristic of this remarkable man that he had no friends)—learned that Stanton's absence was occasioned by arrangements made for his welfare. Gentle zephyrs of appreciation rippled the surface of the philanthropist's fame. In his modest way, the adoptive father was understood to be putting corner-stones on his beneficence. Mr. Borlase often alluded, in an absent-minded manner, to secret charities, the overt right hand scripturally unaware what deeds were done of the benevolent and occult left. This, it was felt, was one of them. The splendours of the Borlasian munificence gained by this obscurity, imagination lending aid. It is through a similar reticence of manner that Milton is considered by some critics to excel the author of the *Divina Commedia*. Vulgar shop-assistants (what man is a hero to his valet?) asked each other what the deuce could have led to the young governor's expulsion. Stanton had been liked by all of them. But no one at Peckham Lane ventured to inquire.

For it is a painful fact, so sorely do the mental labours of the benevolent tax a generous brain, that about this time Mr. Borlase's employing temper was exceptionally venomous. Business, against all precedent and reasonable expectation, was not as good as it might have been this summer. Smith & Perks, a brace of enterprising capitalists descending from the wholesale, had opened a large and flagrantly competitive establishment a few streets off. Their vast emporium, bright with plate-glass and nickel fittings, displayed wares of a novelty and splendour which made their modest price-tickets horribly disconcerting to an instructed eye: nor could all Mr. Borlase's confabulations with thrifty Germans from the eastern slum-mery behind Aldersgate Street yield any satisfactory remedy or any clue to Smith & Perks's sources of supply. Prices, meantime, tended to a minimum. Nothing could have been much worse for an exceptional and altogether unprecedented Summer Sale, designed to make way for new wares, and clear out once and for all accumulations undeniably outdated by the novelties of the new emporium, than to find that the most daring abatements still left Borlase & Company's old stuff dearer than the innovating importations of the enemy. Even a final marking down on the last two days did not mend matters. The Suburb was (for once) too clever for its Premier Merchant. The Sale was a failure: even at a loss on buying prices, the stock would not budge.

Nor was the fiasco of the Special Sale anything but a culminating misdeed of the trickster, Fortune. From the very opening of the rival establishment of Smith & Perks, Borlase & Company's trade had fallen off. Few who have not had practical experience of it plumb the profundities of the female shopper. You might have thought, as you walked with Prudence Wheble and her mother through the commercial part of the Southern Suburb, that a ticketed blouse in one window and a similar exhibit in another had produced no effect. Far otherwise. In a month's time, summer weather having called sudden attention to the gaps in Miss Wheble's wardrobe, the prices of these two garments would be remembered and compared and reasoned upon. "That new shop nearer this way is cheaper than Borlase's now," Prudence would remember, "and the things look fresher."

"Yes, but Borlase's have a sale on next week. It's advertised in the *Mercury*. There might be something to pick up," Mrs. Wheble would reply. But the sale advertisement could not make mother or daughter forget what the windows had told them.

Mr. Borlase, for once in his life, made a mistake about that Special Sale. He overestimated its glamorous effect on minds like those of the Whebles. Any dame of the Suburb is perfectly capable of remembering, amid all the rush of the crowded counter, regular goods seen elsewhere at lower prices than "specially reduced

lines" alluringly reticketed. She is even capable of going away to inspect the rival wares at close quarters before deciding. Mr. Borlase was beaten on his own ground. Again and again he came to the rescue of shopgirls in straits: again and again, when customers would not wait to speak with him, he fined luckless assistants for "swops." Even the terrors of his punishment fell off of late. Smith & Perks were adding every week to their staff, as new departments reached the opening stage: and Smith & Perks not only fed their young men and women better than Mr. Borlase, but did not fine them, and in the arrogant strength of their reliance on new goods and low prices closed defiantly every night at six o'clock. Borlase & Company's assistants were glad of a chance to change, and even went surreptitiously to register themselves for future vacancies.

After the sale week, Mr. Borlase sate him down one early-closing afternoon to review his bank account, and certain books recording stock and purchases, that he might fully grasp the situation and see where he stood, "what reinforcement he might gain from hope; if not, what resolution from despair." Careful examination revealed the fact that "takings" had fallen seriously low, and even with a conspicuous reduction of stock in trade his balance at the bank was unsatisfactory. Of late Mr. Borlase had become dissatisfied with his investments—the business, for a good many years, had been sufficiently prospering to release many thou-

sands of pounds from working capital—and had some time before sold Railway Debentures, Local Loans and other sound but ununusurious holdings, in favour of certain South American securities capable of yielding, at their current prices, dividends not uncomfortable to a greedy mind.

Mark, here, how tortuous are the operations of Fate in her less kindly moods. Who would have connected a slight running down of a London stockbroker's nervous energy, making calls on a usually excellent and sufficient blood supply, and hereby setting up a slight and unperceived cerebral anæmia, with the misdoings of a Spaniardly-descending politician just over the Chilian frontier? No man. Yet these two circumstances ingeniously combined for the discomfiture of a South London draper. Mr. Borlase had complained to his broker of the poor return yielded by gilt-edged stocks. The judgment of his adviser, lacking something of its usual soundness from the physical causes already hinted at, overestimated the effect of a recent rise in the nitrate of soda market. Investments secured on the revenues of certain interested republics would yield, Mr. Borlase was informed, double the interest he was now acquiring: and the moment appeared favourable to a purchaser. Government security seemed to Mr. Borlase government security all the world over: and the considerable differences between highest and lowest prices in the last five years, which ought to have warned him, and would

certainly have warned a judicious stockbroker, unharried by cerebral anæmia, only emphasized the present cheapness of the investments. Mr. Borlase had directed his broker to sell and to buy. And now, on this Thursday evening, when Mr. Borlase perceived that he must speedily have money for business purposes, the papers had but one story. An insurrection had broken out in Latin South America; an agitator had crossed certain frontiers in one direction, a president (hurriedly) in the other; all the fat was in the fire, and a provisional government, strongly tainted by repudiating tendencies as regards public debt, was putting people up against walls and shooting them right and left. Mr. Borlase's investments were not merely deteriorated. They were unsaleable. He had, moreover, in a moment of exaltation been led into yet greater follies. He had bought largely of Home Railway Stocks for the account—stocks which seemed certain to rise, but which (his paper told him only too surely) had perversely fallen. On these, since he was in no position to take (as the phrase goes) his investments off the market, he must pay heavy differences, or at best find the moneys, known to the Stock Exchange as *contango*, for postponing until another fortnight his liability for them. In this contingency, he saw nothing to do but to embark on further risks. He got out paper and pens to write to his broker.

At this moment his door was nervously knocked upon by Mrs. Dobson, the house-

keeper, Mr. Borlase's fervent ally in the arrangement of domestic economies, a naturally penurious taste combining in this Abdiel of the emporium staff with her awe of the master. But she had her difficulties.

"I wished to speak, sir," she began, as though the desire had now evaporated—which indeed it secretly had now she found herself in the Presence—"about the butcher's bill."

"Yes," said Mr. Borlase, with a harassed scowl. "What about it?"

"The young men do grumble that awful at that there frozen mutton," the housekeeper pursued. "They pleg my life out over it."

"Eh?" Mr. Borlase was aroused to exclaim.

"They say as there's no taste in it—no strength, in a manner of speaking, sir. And what with them as picks it about and won't eat it, and them as wants more every meal because they say it isn't, as you may say, satisfying, having so little taste, it don't go no way. The meat bill's awful."

Mrs. Dobson produced from its place of concealment the subject of this lamentation. "Look at it!"

Mr. Borlase did look, with indignation. "What can you suggest?" he asked.

Mrs. Dobson plucked at her handkerchief. "I don't know what to say, sir."

"Tut, tut! What are you here for? Am I my own housekeeper?"

"Well, sir, if—if that is——"

"Well, go on—go on."

"If we was to try the better kind—I don't mean English mutton, sir" (Mrs. Dobson was shocked at the possible attribution to her of a proposal so base), "but the other colonial. I think it might go further, and the young men wouldn't grumble so."

Mr. Borlase passed a hand over his outraged brow.

"I never—in my life—heard such a thing!" he said slowly. "You astonish me, House-keeper. Encourage such gluttony I never will! What are young men and women coming to, I should like to know? Such high-stomached ideas! The object of food is to nourish the body, I believe, not to tickle people's palates. I never heard of such a thing! When I was a young man, once I remember something of the same kind. A lot of men threw up their employment—quarrelled with their food—struck, in fact. A pack of dainty fools! I stuck to my work and took the place of my seniors when they threw themselves out of work. I was manager of that warehouse within a year. That's the way I was brought up—to eat the food that was set before me. Saucy rats!" he continued, reverting to the present disturbance. "Saucy rats, to quarrel with good boiled mutton—and roasted meat once a week, indeed! I'll physic 'em."

"But the butcher's bill, sir?" Mrs. Dobson ventured.

"Eh? Let me look at it. Six pounds thirteen last week? Preposterous! Cut down the orders and make more suet dumplings: and

don't come to me with any more tales from these counter-jumping epicures, Housekeeper. I'm busy. I've got worries enough, God knows, without that."

There was a postman's knock upon the door below.

"Bring me up my letters," Mr. Borlase commanded, and the housekeeper hurried off, while her master resumed his letter-writing and the study of his unpropitious bank book.

It was not until he had settled, in his own mind, upon a course of action which promised to tide him over his immediate difficulties (as, in point of fact, it rather fortuitously did) that he turned to his letters and opened them. There were three: and each embodied an inquiry concerning the character of an assistant who was leaving Borlase & Company's employment for that of some other firm.

"Damn it!" he said, as he flung them petulantly from him, "I'll make it a rule that I give no characters in future."

Was he a sinking ship? Were the rats, as he had just called his miserable drudges, leaving him? The empty parlour, whither he had had his account books conveyed, seemed unaccountably bleak and unhomelike. If Stanton——

Mr. Borlase, as the earlier portions of this narrative showed in more ways than one, was not a man who cultivated the softer affections. It is written that blessed is the man who remembereth the poor and needy. Mr. Borlase

secured the blessing chiefly by remembering how to take advantage of the poor and needy. The nearest thing in his life to a disinterested warming of the heart had been some emotions which had somehow crept into it—he would have been less than physically human if it could have wholly excluded them—when he witnessed the passion of thwarted maternity which Mrs. Borlase had lavished upon the child of her adoption. Little Stanton's first steps, the baby love born in the child's eyes, to be reflected rapturously in his foster-mother's as she clasped the little one to her barren bosom, might have made John Borlase a better man, if he had given scope to his emotions. The child's first words, the prayers lisped at an adventitious mother's knee, stirred the nearest approach to true religious feeling which this Churchwarden had ever experienced. But business and the ardour of money-getting absorbed him and put a speedy term to this weakness. Business had been Mr. Borlase's idol—the Jaganath that had trampled on his soul. Business in itself was the bane of it. Not alone Mammon—"Mammon, the least-erected sprite that fell"—but a sheer passion for transaction, not uncommon in those who have fought a lifetime's fight for wealth, crushed out and dried up all the softer essences of his nature. *Nemo repente fuit turpissimus*. It takes a lifetime to make a Borlase, and he—even he—had had moments of passion, moments of folly, as well as of softness. But the ruling impulse always won. Business is an exacting

god. It demands, of such natures as this, all. The child's prattle and noisiness disturbed weighty cogitations. At five years old, Stanton had once come weeping from his side. "Daddy always sends me away," he whispered. Mrs. Borlase took him to another room and played with him untiringly until he was happy and ready for bed. She never again sent the boy to her husband. Stanton, with the marvellous self-repression of some children, never intruded upon him again. Life was lived as before. There was no evident loss of continuity. But Mr. Borlase managed his business uninterrupted, and his wife had her boy all to herself, until her sudden death obliged Mr. Borlase, at a much later date, to take the charge of Stanton into his own hands.

He had not been, then, a very tender guardian. But whatever of solicitude he had to spare from himself and his business, Stanton had certainly received. Austerely as Mr. Borlase had treated the young man during the brief period of his trial in the shop, he found time and feeling to miss him now. If Stanton had been still at home, the place wouldn't be quite so empty! Mr. Borlase recalled with a pang the little scene of thirteen years ago, just hinted at above. With a sudden insurgence of regret, there came to him the sense that he had yet again sent the boy away. For a moment the impulse ran through him to write to Stanton—to recall him—to make another effort with him. He even rose, and laid his hand upon the writing-desk which he had been using earlier in the evening.

But Mr. Borlase was no sentimentalist. What he had done with the boy had been maturely conceived. Moreover, with things in their present condition, any distraction of his own energies would be injurious to business: and business, after all, was business—the primary interest of life.

“Pshaw!” said Mr. Borlase to himself. “Am I growing old, to hanker like this?”

He looked at his watch, then round the empty room again. He did not care to sit down.

The assistants’ sitting-room, into which he put his head, was empty. All the young women had gone out. The whole building was depressingly silent. He was tired of turning over and considering and reconsidering the ledger. He had made his plans: he cursed the necessary inaction of the night. Nothing could very well be done until to-morrow. Then, for one thing, he would give the men and girls his views on the impropriety of grumbling at wholesome and sufficient food. The form of an oration at breakfast time began to shape itself in his mind: he would hold forth convincingly on the sin of greediness; but even this did not raise Mr. Borlase’s spirits. Most assuredly he meant to stand no nonsense. No good that he could remember had ever come of pampering the rebellious appetites of shop-assistants. Probably the best thing to do was to go, after all, and dine out at a city restaurant, as he was in the habit of doing on Thursday evenings. Ringing, therefore, for the housekeeper, he countermanded his dinner,

which was already being laid, and put on his tall silk hat—a hat which, like everything else appertaining to Mr. Borlase, had, as regards its very shape, something uncompromising in it. It was the sort of hat which has an owner who is determined to maintain his rights.

Mr. Borlase, when he dined out, did this, as he did everything, thoroughly. He ate and drank to-night, therefore, heartily and with discrimination. As dinner slowly progressed to a finish he felt easier in his mind. He had had difficulties in business before. Times of struggle and of troublesome competition had come and passed away. He was too sure of himself, too absolutely master of his craft, to doubt that he would weather this storm too. As for this South American trouble—probably it wouldn't turn out as badly as it threatened. Something would be saved out of the wreck. And in any case, the business could be pulled into shape again. Though he thought of business while he ate, Mr. Borlase did not permit business absent to interfere with duty present. As in everything else, so in dining, he stood no nonsense.

“I should think,” he remarked to the head waiter, summoned on the presentation of his bill, “that you might consult your own interests better than to fob off an old customer like me with the kind of fruit-salad you set before me to-night. Tinned pineapple—don't tell me: I know what I'm talking about—and peaches half ripe, and a mere wash of beggarly, watery *mar-*

aschino. I expect fresh fruit and a dash of green *Chartreuse* in a fruit salad for my eating. If the slush you sent down to me to-night is good enough for your ordinary customers, it isn't good enough for me: mind that!"

Mr. Borlase threw down the money for his dinner, and halved his usual tip when he took the change, by way of marking displeasure.

CHAPTER XVII

NEW ACQUAINTANCES

STANTON found his life in Mr. Douglas's office a much pleasanter affair than he had dared to hope. Certainly his work was far less exacting than the labour that had been required of him by his guardian: and when his first diffident timidity wore off he liked his new comrades sufficiently well.

Mr. Schneider, who had a taste for bullying, restrained by nervous fear of creating an enemy who might bear tales, was childishly jealous of every newcomer, and made Stanton uncomfortable sometimes. Thurlow, who followed the book-keeper's lead, endeavoured to resuscitate his own dignity by ordering Stanton about: but, on the whole, Stanton was happy, and Lucraft's amusing companionship delighted him inordinately. Edmund, who had remembered his father's injunction, showed kindness towards the lad, and in a quiet way protected him, without allowing this fact to do him a mischief. Stanton made mistakes of judgment, and infringed the unwritten, unspoken etiquette which Mr. Schneider had erected in the office. Thus, while the hour for closing was six, and work was stopped at, or a little before, that hour, there was an understanding that the clerks should not

leave immediately. They all contrived from half-past five onward to wash and prepare for going home: the last half hour hardly counted, except for Stanton, who had to copy and to put stamps on the letters which he received from Miss Chippendale, and take them to the post-office. This done, and the books put in the safe (it was a point of scruple with Mr. Schneider not to do this himself: "I am not der office-boy, isn't it?" he said), Stanton had, on the first few evenings, put on his hat, said "Good-night, gentlemen" (a formula acquired from the example of Lucraft's morning salutation), and gone home. Mr. Schneider looked at Thurlow and sniffed significantly. Edmund, who walked home, usually left a little after five.

On the Monday of Stanton's second week he was recalled by the book-keeper, who had discussed his proceedings with Thurlow on Saturday. The office was nominally closed at two on the last day of the week, but it was Mr. Schneider's custom to go out to lunch about half-past one, and expect the others to await his return before leaving. Stanton, unwarned by Lucraft, who hoped to see this custom broken down, went away at two o'clock. When, half an hour later, the other three were rejoined by their principal, the latter looked round the office, as if seeking something.

"Where is der boy?" he inquired.

"I do' know," said Thurlow. "Gone home, I think."

"Dese new brooms from der gofornor sweep

demselves clean," was Mr. Schneider's comment; and when, on Monday night, Stanton was leaving as usual, he recalled him, just as he held the door to let Miss Chippendale pass him.

"Are you in a hurry, Mr. Stanton?" enquired the book-keeper.

"No, sir," he replied innocently. "Do you want me?"

"No, I don'd want you, as id happens," Mr. Schneider replied sourly, "but I t'ought you seemed radher in a hurry to go away"—as if this were a reason for recalling him. Thurlow exchanged a grin with Lucraft.

"Because," Mr. Schneider pursued, "vhen I coom back on Sadurday you had also gone."

"I thought the work was done," said Stanton. "Did you want me, then?"

"My Gott, A'mighty Gott, no, I didn'd want you, as regarts dat is goncernt," the book-keeper replied, rather disconcerted by Stanton's own mystified air, which (as Stanton was unconscious of any omission) had nothing apologetic in it. "But if I had wanted you, it had been all der same. You had gone. Finish! Isn't it?"

"I'm very sorry, sir," said Stanton, comprehending at last that he had done something wrong. "But as you told me to put the books away, I supposed that you had done for the day. What time *do* we close on Saturdays?"

"P'ff! I subbose you haf been told from der gofornor dot der office closes at two o'clock, und, derefore, you take yourself scarce," Mr. Schneider grumbled, "mitout vaiting to *see* if

dere wass anyding to do or not. I can do it myself. Finish! You couldn't gif yourselfs more air, you youngsters," he concluded, with a delicious implication, "not if—not if you wass—der book-keeper! Isn't it?" he repeated, turning to Thurlow and Lucraft.

His English always grew a little worse when he was at all agitated. Stanton, who perceived that he had nothing to say, was red and uncomfortable. He stood about—there was no earthly thing to do—until Schneider had fidgetted up and down the desk for some minutes, and even Thurlow had put on his hat. Lucraft said "good-night" and left, followed by Thurlow. Last of all the book-keeper produced the door keys, gave the knurl of the combination lock on the safe a twist and tried the handle to make sure that it was fast, wiped his silk hat on his sleeve and departed also, conducting Stanton to the door. Nothing was said by either.

"Put your foot in it last night, didn't you?" said Lucraft in the morning. Stanton's time was not at all fully occupied, and there were corners in the office where Lucraft could pretend to be busy and indulge Stanton with anecdote and imitation. He now proceeded to re-enact the scene of Monday evening, with much humour. Peters, who was press-copying an invoice close at hand, and who had been absent on a half day's leave overnight, squirmed with laughter ill-suppressed.

"I couldn't make out what I had done," said Stanton. "There was nothing to stay for. It's

nothing to me to stay half an hour if he wants me to, but I wasn't to know, you know."

"Of course you weren't," said Lucraft. "It's all damn' nonsense. The old man simply likes to be fussed with. I'll give you the tip, though. Wait until he has locked the safe. Then ask him if you can do anything else for him. He'll say 'No:' then you can clear out. He only wants to be asked. Peters always asks him, don't you, Pete?"

"Yes," said Peters. "That's the idea. What I mean, there isn't anything to do, don't you know; only he thinks you oughtn't to go without asking." Lucraft would have liked Peters to join him in ignoring this wish, and constantly girded at the latter's subserviency. He hated to wait about after closing time, but did not choose to make himself the single object of Schneider's animosity.

Just then Edmund came up. Lucraft remarked, as if continuing a discussion, "I make it fifteen pounds seven and threepence net, Mr. Peters."

"All right. I'll try it again," said the latter, and hurried off.

"You know French, don't you, Stanton?" Edmund asked, ignoring this *ruse*.

"Yes, a little, sir," Stanton replied.

"Then I wish you'd translate this. Write it in red ink on the margin."

Stanton went to his desk with the letter that had been handed to him. Soon encountering an unfamiliar word, he fetched a French dictionary

which he had noticed lying on the top of the safe. This proceeding attracted the attention of the book-keeper, who immediately came and looked without ceremony over his shoulder, with an air of much contempt for Stanton's erudition.

"W'at haf you got to do, Mr. Stanton?" he enquired.

"To translate this," said Stanton, blushing. Schneider's enquiries somehow made him always uncomfortable. The book-keeper treated Stanton's work for Edmund as a personal affront.

"Oh," he now remarked sourly. Stanton, still red, went on nervously, forgetting words quite familiar to him and consulting the dictionary. The book-keeper walked away.

On receiving the translation, Edmund, who was rather diffident about his own French, though he probably knew more than Stanton did, carried it to his father, and presently drafted a reply, which he bade Stanton put into French.

"I'm not sure I can do it quite grammatically," said Stanton.

"Oh, you can make it understandable," said young Douglas kindly. "You translated their letter very well."

So Stanton went to work with good will and produced, in due course, an astonishing piece of translation. However, as Edmund had said, it was clear enough for practical purposes. Mr. Douglas, later on, signed the letter, and it went out to be copied with others.

Mr. Schneider, who had been in wait, extracted it from the basket, and perused it with many sniffs.

"Are you der foreign correspondent, Mr. Stanton?" he inquired.

Stanton blushed again. "No, sir. Mr. Edmund asked me to do what I could with this: that is all," he said.

Mr. Schneider, without answering him, called Thurlow. "I see der gofernor signs dis," he said.

"Yes?" replied Thurlow. "What's it about?"

"P'ff! I haven't got der time to read all der letters," said the other. "I got my books to keep. Gootness knows, I haf enough to do. I don'd know what it iss about. No more der gofernor: der gofernor is not knowing French, isn't it?"

"Not a word," echoed Thurlow.

"If der gofernor like to sign w'at he can'd read: and if oder peoples likes to take der resbonsibility, it isn'd my fault, isn'd it?" pursued the book-keeper. "My Gott, A'mighty Gott, I would be very sorry to take der resbonsibility mineself, if dere was in der business a misdakes, isn'd it?" He looked jealously at the uncomfortable Stanton, threw the letter back into the basket and walked away, grumbling to himself, to take from his overcoat pocket something which he slipped quickly into that of his office coat, and to disappear into the warehouse. Lucraft, with a cautious glance at Edmund's door,

promptly left his seat and executed a noiseless *pas seul* before the safe, expressive of keen amusement.

"My position is being oontermined!" he remarked. Peters and Thurlow laughed. Stanton wondered.

"You aren't up to the old 'un yet," Lucraft explained. "You mustn't mind his little ways. He'll get used to you after a little while, and then you won't 'oontermine' his position any more. I say, I didn't know you were such a scholar, Stanton. Have you been to France?"

"No," said Stanton. "I really don't know much about it. But I learned enough at school to translate a simple thing after a fashion: and of course Mr. Edmund drafted what he wanted said, and the governor knew all about it."

"Oh, it's all right," said Lucraft easily. "Don't you mind the old man's tantrums: he's only jealous because he wasn't asked to do it himself. I expect he speaks French 'like a dem'd native,' same as he does English. If he *had* been asked, he'd have grouched and grumbled all the afternoon about the loss of time. He's a contrary old buffer."

A step on the stair sent them to their places. Mr. Schneider toddled up, wiping his moustache with his fingers, visited his overcoat anew, and finally returned to his desk. Here he rubbed his ruler in his armpit, and appeared to be at work.

Stanton's admiration of Lucraft grew every day. The latter, with his fair, Saxon face, his clear blue eyes, his perfect health, and astonish-

ing ability to do a number of things well, fascinated him. They did not often meet outside the office; but there was ample leisure for the ripening of acquaintanceship within it. Lucraft's manners, his penmanship, his astute mastery of office-craft, the unfailing readiness of his wit, were the subjects of Stanton's despairing imitation. It seemed to him (as he told Wicksted) that never had he met with such a man.

"He can do *anything*," he said to his friend. "He has put me up to no end of dodges in my work, and he can juggle better than Cinquevalli" (a performer whose feats, here somewhat underestimated, Stanton had witnessed at a music-hall in company with Peters). "I never saw such a chap, Wicksted."

"He must be worth knowing, from your account," said Wicksted.

"I'm rather surprised that he stays in an office," said Stanton, with admiration. "I should think he could make money anywhere. He can keep you laughing for an hour at a time: and he can imitate Schneider's step or the governor's, coming up the office, to the life. Peters was reading a newspaper under his desk lid, before Schneider got back from lunch to-day, and Lucraft walked out from behind the screen with exactly Mr. Douglas's step. He made Peters jump out of his skin nearly. It was an awful lark."

"Who's Peters?" asked Mrs. Wicksted, who was visiting Stanton with her husband in Mrs. Bonnington's parlour, borrowed for the evening.

"He's the third clerk," said Stanton.

"*Why!*" exclaimed Wicksted. "I have been trying to remember for a long time what I knew of Douglas's. Of course, that's where Peters's brother was."

"What do you mean?" asked Stanton.

"Why—it was before your time, Stanton, and after yours, Edie," he explained. "We had a fellow named Peters in the shop. Borlase sacked him for stopping out all night and coming back late in the morning, half dead. He'd been drinking with this brother of his. I should think he is a dangerous man, Stanton."

"I've never seen him drinking," said Stanton. "I went to the Cosmopolitan with him the other night, as I told you, and we only drank a bottle of beer between us."

"What sort of looking man is he?" asked Wicksted.

"Oh, stout, rather bilious looking. Wears a little moustache," said Stanton.

"Dark?"

"No, brown. He's not a bad sort. Nothing like Mr. Lucraft, of course, but he knows a thing or two. One thing I can tell you. He's 'near.' Never wastes a halfpenny."

"That's our Peters's brother!" said Wicksted triumphantly. "There's a family of 'em evidently. Our Peters was a great hand at saving. Well, he had a savings bank account and put money away out of his screw at our place! You don't need telling more than that!"

"I should think not and all," said Mrs. Wicksted, with (I fear) a sniff.

"Well, he got his brother the bag, anyhow," Wicksted resumed, reverting to Douglas's Peters. "And I don't know what became of him."

"Peters never mentions him," said Stanton; "and I don't suppose he knows I came from the same place. I'll ask him about it."

He took an opportunity of doing so next day. "Oh, were you at Borlase's?" said Peters, when Stanton explained his enquiry. "Rotten hole, isn't it?"

"How do you mean?" asked Stanton.

"Oh, bad grub, late hours, and a lot to do," said Peters. "At least, what I mean, so my brother used to say."

"I'm afraid the men and girls aren't very well fed," said Stanton, forgetting for a moment that his own position in the Borlase establishment was not to transpire. Then, recollecting this, he added lamely: "I mean, yes: we did have to work rather hard."

"My brother Bob left there some time ago," said Peters. "He got into bad habits—used to come borrowing money. I've lost sight of him lately. He came here once or twice, but I told him I wouldn't have it. You know, I used to knock about a bit myself—a fellow must see life and sow his wild oats, you know, but there's a moderation in things, and my brother let himself go rather." Mr. Peters considered that in going to several music-halls, and walking through Piccadilly before finding his way home thereafter, he had seen nearly as much as life has to show. It is an opinion not uncommon.

CHAPTER XVIII

NEW FRIENDS

EXCEPT for their occasional business contact—as where Stanton had to collect the day's type-written letters for copying, and ultimate despatch by post—Miss Chippendale for some weeks saw very little of the new clerk. She noted with displeasure his ripening acquaintance with Lucraft, and the manner in which he had fallen into the lax, easy-going ways of the office, as fostered by that resourceful person. When at last her interest found its opportunity, it was through an accident which tended, somewhat, to raise her estimate of him. Having observed by his reference that he came from a draper's shop, she was anxious to inform herself concerning the inner life of these emporia. The democratic society of the studio was greatly interested in all sorts and conditions of laborious life, condemning modern systems as iniquitous and demoralising; longing for the discovery of means by which the moral and physical welfare of workers might be promoted; severely condemnatory of mercantile chicanery.

Stanton's timid, boyish nature covered more than she had had as yet any chance of divining, though his face seemed to her accustomed eye, already trained to some degree of observation

by the nature of her domestic environment, to have more in it, for example, than the faces of Thurlow or Peters. Certainly Lucraft, with all his cleverness, had not perceived as much. Stanton was of an unlimited plasticity. Lucraft, had no other influences supervened, would have done more with Stanton than he had any chance of doing with Edmund Douglas. The latter was a man of the world compared with poor Stanton. He could also have done more than with Peters and Thurlow, because Stanton had more in him. Stanton might, in time, have become as unscrupulous as Lucraft himself, though he would never have been as cleverly crafty. And to say this is, in a way, to pay new tribute to Mr. Lucraft; for Stanton had been, thanks to Mr. Borlase's money, far better educated than any of his colleagues: he had brains and an intelligence which he did not despise as they did theirs. Miss Chippendale would certainly not have encountered either Peters or Thurlow (or even Lucraft) as she eventually encountered Stanton, spending a Saturday afternoon in the British Museum.

She found him near the place where they take your umbrella away from you (unless you are going to the Library), looking rather aimlessly up the side staircase. He was paying his first visit to the national curiosity shop, and did not quite know where to begin. Seeing Miss Chippendale, he coloured and took off his hat awkwardly, with an impulse towards flight. Certainly it was with no eagerness to make an op-

portunity of this chance encounter that he found himself talking to her: rather, he had feared lest it should seem uncivil to let her pass in silence, though he was horribly embarrassed at having (he conceived) to enter upon a conversation. It was made, however, easier for him than he could have hoped; and Mary liked him all the better for his boy's shyness.

"Do you 'read' here, too, then?" she asked, when he had managed to say that the museum was an enormous place.

"'Read'?" he enquired. "Oh, I see what you mean. No, I haven't a reading-room ticket. I just came in to look at things."

"And what 'things' have you looked at?" she asked him. "Are you interested in any particular subject here?"

"No; that is, I hardly know enough to have a special subject, Miss Chippendale," he replied. "I thought this stone vase rather funny," he added, trying to find something to say—it seemed so very unintelligent to have gathered no impressions at all—"though I don't know why they call it a crater."

"A crater is a cup," said Mary. "That's all. I think it is the Greek word. Have you been to see the Elgin Marbles yet?"

"No. Are they upstairs?" he asked, wondering vaguely what sort of geological specimens she might be referring to. Wicksted had been hitherto his only point of contact with the fine arts: and Wicksted did not work from the antique.

"No. They are on this floor," Miss Chippendale said. "Come: I'll show them to you. My brother will very likely be there: he is in here, somewhere, and promised to meet me at tea-time. My brother is a sculptor, you know," she added, as they passed through the long gallery of Roman emperors with undesirable countenances—though there was no perceptible means by which Stanton could have known what she told him. She stopped later to show the head of Herennia Etruscilla—you will find it, if they haven't rearranged the gallery yet, just round a corner in the long gallery.

"That's one of our gems," she assured him, with a cicerone's proprietorship. "Isn't it wonderfully modern looking? It wouldn't be made in the least incongruous by a bonnet! Here" (as they passed farther on, turning to their right) "is archaic Greek work—it has something Egyptian or Assyrian about it, hasn't it? You know, art began down there, somewhere: but it needed Greece to make it really glorious, as Greece developed. Here are the Marbles. There! Aren't they grand? Do you know anything about sculpture?" She looked at him interrogatively, good-naturedly anxious to make him comfortable, and to draw out what she felt sure was in him.

"I don't think I do know much about it," he said. "I don't care for statues very much."

"I should think not, in London," she said. "But look. You like these, don't you?"

"They're—they're rather—damaged, aren't they?" he ventured.

She controlled herself. "Well, they are a little out of repair. You know, they came from the Parthenon: my brother calls them 'the national swag'—because we rather stole them, you know. It is a crime to have brought them away; but I'm afraid I'm rather glad we committed it."

"Why?" he asked rather bleakly, not having very well understood.

"Because they are so beautiful. Besides, so many more people will see them here," she explained.

Stanton, whose æsthetic education had been neglected, looked enquiringly, and perhaps rather vacantly, at her. "You don't see it?" she interpreted. "No. But you see you are only looking at them for the first time. If you would come again and again, you would soon get to know them, and their loveliness would eat its way into you! But see: look how that drapery, all broken as it is, *hangs*. Look how it clings to the figure of that Fate—they think they are Fates—why, it has almost the illusion of transparency!" She warmed to her subject, looking from his eyes to the marbles with eager championship. "I wish my brother were here," she concluded. "*He* understands them: *he* would make you see the beauty that is in them. But you need to see them often."

"That drapery *is* clever, as you say," Stanton admitted, ineptly. "But I haven't got used to all this mutilation: I can't allow for what is missing."

"You will if you stay with them," she assured him. "And I can promise you that the happiness they'll give you is well worth the trouble of coming. I can't get myself away from them, sometimes, and my brother and I often come in here just to look at this frieze alone. It is *full* of things. There are a hundred and ten horses in it, and no two of them in the same attitude!"

Stanton stooped to look at it. "It is very kind of you to show it to me, Miss Chippendale," he said, and would have liked to add, "but don't let me waste your time," only he feared lest this should make her think he wished to escape. He no longer did wish it. To see things, and have them explained to him, was proving much more agreeable than the somewhat arid Saturday afternoons he had spent lately at South Kensington, the National Gallery and other public places of exhibition.

"No, it isn't," Miss Chippendale said, in her uncompromising way. "I came to look for my brother; and now I'm going to the reading-room. If you care to find your way back here at five, I shall meet you here again, and I'll introduce you to my brother. Don't come if you don't want to, though."

"I should like to, very much," said Stanton, and she looked at his face to see whether this was a polite acquiescence or an expression of real interest. Had it been the former, she was likely to have told him so; the frank rough habit of the community she lived in was not easily put off. But Stanton's honest, sincere-

looking eyes saved him. He wondered that he had not before noted the prettiness of hers, and their fine shape.

"I'll take you to the reading-room, then," he said.

"There is no occasion," she replied. She disliked the sort of deference which implies that a woman needs "looking after." "But you may come all the same," she added, relenting when his face fell; "and you can go into the Grenville Library. You will see some interesting things there."

Arrived at their first meeting-place, she pointed out the collection she had named. "Do you care for poetry?" she asked, pausing.

"I am extremely fond of it," he said warmly, glad to have reached a subject on which he did providentially possess ideas. Wicksted, in their bookish talks, had imparted to Stanton much of his own superficial taste for verse, when it ran smoothly and was either not too profound or else *so* profound that the music of it satisfied them of itself, and asked no effort of exact comprehension.

"Well, then, if you go rather far through, and turn down that recess to the right, you will see the original manuscript of Gray's 'Elegy,'" she announced.

"Really?" he said, with enthusiasm. "I shall like *that*."

"There are numbers of others, too," said Mary. "I only mentioned the 'Elegy' because it is the most famous."

"And the most beautiful, surely!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, perhaps it is," she admitted. "It's wonderfully finished, isn't it? Like a miniature on ivory—flawless. Well, I won't say good-bye, if you mean to come and meet us."

"Thank you ever so much," he found readiness enough to say. "I'm awfully glad I met you, Miss Chippendale."

She went off, with her short, quick nod, like a bird pecking; and Stanton wandered rather belatedly into the Grenville Library, stopping to look at Queen Elizabeth's letter, at Magna Charta, and the rich laboriousness of the monkish illuminatings. When he looked at his watch presently he was sensible of a disappointment to find that it was only half past three—and he had already found the "Elegy," wondered at its neatness, and read as much of it as could be seen in its glass *passepartout*. The place was very still and almost deserted. A shabby man, with long hair, pored over one of the black texts; an attendant moved a ladder, on wheels, across the matting, and climbed to one of the upper receptacles. Coming quickly round a case, Stanton found a man and a tall girl in mourning, who had forgotten manuscripts, and texts, and historical documents alike. They stood hand in hand and looked into each other's eyes.

Stanton pulled out his watch again. It was only five and twenty minutes to four. He went out into the Central Hall, determined to try the upper galleries, and see what these might contain.

In a little time, as he wandered up and down among the coins and statuettes, and presently tried the Natural History collection, and the bones, it seemed to him that he must have exhausted the interest he was capable of feeling in the place, so bored and lonely did he feel; by twenty minutes to five he was examining the Elgin Marbles afresh, and persuading himself that they had, after all, a certain charm. A loose-limbed, athletic-looking man, with a beard *en Vandyck*, a low collar, and a necktie of soft terra-cotta silk, was looking with critical satisfaction at the central group—stepping back and holding his head aside to catch some individual view of the Fates, and pulling the ends of a fierce moustache as he paused to take in some detail that had given him pleasure.

Stanton walked round also with the stealthy tread appropriate to churches and other reverend edifices—a step which the Museum palpably invites even when it is already noisy with the ring of heedless heels. The aloofness and cold beauty of the marbles insensibly affected him, and as he passed behind the stranger when the latter was making one of his backward steps, Stanton was not alert enough to avoid him, and there was a sudden *corps à corps* which disconcerted them both.

“Sorry,” said the tall man, in a strong bass voice. “My fault, I think.”

“No, mine,” Stanton politely answered—he was always ready to take upon himself the

blame of a little accident. "I ought to have looked where I was going."

"Ought you?" said the other. "Well, perhaps so. Jolly group, isn't it?"

"I begin to think so," Stanton admitted. "But I never saw it until this afternoon."

"Really?" said the other. "Well, these headless ladies are worth knowing. You must have been 'very pleased to meet them,' as the Americans say." He walked off with his determined stride, and Stanton saw that it was to meet Miss Chippendale, who had just come into the room.

"So you found each other!" she exclaimed, drawing them together with her look. "How did you manage that?"

"It was an effect of gravitation," replied her brother (for, of course, that is who the stranger was). "But whom, by the way, have I found?"

"Why—Mr. Stanton," Mary answered. "I thought Mr. Stanton must have introduced himself. This is my brother, Mr. Stanton."

The men shook hands. Chippendale's grasp was like the grab of some flexible iron thing. "'I'm very pleased to meet you,' as you say the Americans say," was what Stanton reproduced, smiling.

"You know who Mr. Stanton is, Will?" Mary remarked, in her unembarrassed way. "My new colleague. I found him here this afternoon, and I hope he is coming home to tea with us."

"Is he?" Chippendale answered, turning to Stanton.

“Stanton’s shyness reawoke. “Thank you—I shall—be very pleased,” he said, however. They were passing through the galleries now.

“I told Mr. Stanton you would tell him all about the statuary,” Mary continued, “and I hoped he was asking you.”

“No. We simply ran into each other, and had just done mutually apologising when you came,” said Will. “But I don’t know that there is any explaining to do. Mr. Stanton was so interested that he nearly let me crush him.” He pointed, however, to what occupied a recess in the gallery beside them. “That’s rather a good cast of the Venus of Milo,” he said. “But the marbles are better worthy of Mr. Stanton’s attention. They are authentic, you see, and this is merely a copy.”

“But the copy is handsome, too,” said Stanton vaguely.

“I’ve heard it called ‘perfectly elegant,’” said Chippendale, who had had some Americans as sitters; and Mary laughed. “But it is really hopeless, making cast from old statuary,” Chippendale continued. “This thing, now. It has the form, and approximately the colour, of the real Venus in the Louvre at Paris. But it is no more the Venus than it’s a gargoyle. *The Venus*, eh, Mary?”

Mary sighed reminiscently. “The real one,” Chippendale continued—“well, it is real, and this is a copy. That’s all you can say. There *is* no copy, really. She can’t be copied. She’s inimitable. She lives in a room by herself.

(You haven't been to Paris, Mr. Stanton? No?) Well, in a room by herself, at the end of a long gallery. You see her as soon as you have passed the stairs, where the Winged Victory is. As you come down the gallery, you know, she grows clearer and clearer, and you really see her."

"Yes; and you sit down on the seat to the right of her and just drink in her loveliness," Mary added, catching his enthusiasm. "She is lovely and tender on that side. On the other side, she is stern and severe—the Venus who crushes and breaks. Eh, Will?"

"It is believed," said Chippendale, sententiously, "that Venus is sometimes a very stern goddess, Mr. Stanton. She mustn't keep people from their tea, however." And they walked briskly on, passing through the glass-boxed door, and crossing the vast courtyard, where the tame, dilatory pigeons hardly moved from their path. By the time they had walked down Great Russell Street and were at the door of the house where the Chippendales lived, Stanton found himself disembarrassed and familiar. Will Chippendale's grave mockery and Mary's frank companionableness put him at his ease. They climbed the numerous stairs together, Will last, dragging up a large brown pitcher of water from the kitchen. Stanton, who thought he had never entered such an odd, interesting room, saw them get tea ready. "We're a couple of bachelors, Mr. Stanton," Mary told him, "and do our own housework."

"Thus the domestic-servant problem is solved!" Chippendale added, cutting brown bread and butter. "I think we might have the other window open, Mary. Do you mind, Stanton? You might open it." Mr. Chippendale's foible was that he could rarely get enough fresh air: any apartment under his control was a perfect cave of Boreas.

So they took tea in what did appear to Stanton rather a high wind; and afterwards, by Mary's suggestion, went into Will's studio, that she might show their new friend her brother's work. Stanton found it all intensely interesting. "I never saw anything like this before," he said. "I thought sculpture was all marble."

"No. Marble isn't properly sculpture," said Chippendale. "It's carving. Shaping things with one's fingers—putting on, taking off, modifying—that is sculpture: in the clay. You look—and you try to reproduce: if it isn't right, you change it, see?" He made that little semicircular gesture with the thumb peculiar to painters and sculptors. "In marble, you measure, chop, rub down and copy. Once done, it can't be altered. Mary, don't make me talk shop," he concluded abruptly. "Come." They returned to the other room, and Stanton was allowed to help them "wash up." He was delighted with the unknown, informal life, and was surprised to find how late it had become when he felt that the time had arrived for leaving, and rose to say so.

"Have you really to go?" Mary asked.

"Because we don't want you to go, if you haven't," Chippendale added.

Stanton wished extremely to remain. "I was going out somewhere with Lucraft and Peters," he said.

Mary did not speak. Chippendale, who knew of and detested Lucraft by reputation, looked at her. "Well—if you've promised to go—" he said.

"I don't know that it is quite that," said Stanton; "and I'd far rather stay." He reflected a moment. "They won't wait for me: Lucraft never waits for anyone, he told me so. I'll say I wasn't very well or something," he concluded lamely. "It will be all right."

Mary frowned. "Don't you think it would be all right if you said nothing that was not true?" she suggested bluntly.

CHAPTER XIX

NEW INFLUENCES

THIS foregathering brought Stanton into an acquaintanceship destined to influence him in more ways than one. It opened up before him, indeed, an entirely new manner of thought. Life was exhibited to him through a medium hitherto undreamed of. He had been instructed at school. He was to be educated now.

At first, his sensations were only of interest, of delight. The conversation of his new friends gave him the pleasure that he had hitherto derived only from books: his mind was expanded by contact with minds more cultured than he had known. The extent of their own reading, and their assimilation of it, astonished him. "They are learned," he said to Wicksted, when the latter came alone to see him in his bedroom one Thursday evening.

Thursday was early-closing day in the Suburb, and Mr. Borlase, an unflinching sweater of his workpeople on all lawful occasions, was yet a prop of the local movement. Indeed, the emporium, excelling its compeers, was closed as early as at three o'clock, a circumstance regarded as bearing witness to the benevolent public spirit of the proprietor, and one of the grounds on which, some years earlier, a testi-

monial had been presented to Mr. Borlase at the Vestry.

"And you would enjoy them, too," Stanton averred to his friend. "They simply *live* on art. Mr. Chippendale is a sculptor. I have been in his studio and seen him work. It is fearfully interesting: and their talk—oh, it's wonderful!" He overflowed. "They seem to have read everything: they talk about Shakespeare and Browning just as you or I might talk of the news in the papers."

Wicksted's eyes brightened with interest. Literature was his first love—literature voraciously devoured, ill-assimilated, less than half comprehended, tritely quoted, miscellaneously selected. Stanton told him for the first time of systematic reading, and of reading absorbed into the understanding as a mental *pabulum*. Man, it now appeared, did not live by bread alone, but by every word that issued out of the mouth of Genius. Stanton had hastened to acquire ideas. He had not given himself time to acquire tastes, but his own mind was persuaded that he already had them. "Life," he repeated to Wicksted, "is ugly. It might be so beautiful! All Nature is beautiful—a wet day as well as a fine one, if people had the eyes to see it. There is room," it had been conveyed to him, "for art in daily life." Wicksted thought vaguely of the illustrated papers and of coloured photographs.

The latter, Stanton had learned, were not admirable. Bits of old china, which could be

acquired cheaply in fragmentary condition and put together, to be suspended on wires, constituted "decoration." He had also learned that Japan (as was then the opinion of the critical) had spoken the last word on decorative art: he provided himself with some of the worst specimens of it in the shape of penny fans which caught his eye in an advanced oil-shop near Great Titchfield Street. Only at a later date did he learn that modern Japan is degraded by contact with civilisation, by hurry and the desire to multiply cheap effects. He understood, then, why, after his fans had been nailed on the wall over his washstand for some weeks, he had begun to hate them, and why a shattered and chippy Nankin plate which St. Andrew's Street, Seven Dials, had yielded up for eighteenpence remained always delightful, notwithstanding Mrs. Wicksted's frank depreciation of it as ugly, and of its central subject (a tortuous tree trunk) as not like any tree *she* had ever seen. "It isn't pictorial, you see: it's conventional," Stanton explained.

At the Chippendales', too, he learned of ways in which civilised modernity was objectionable. It was objectionable, the sculptor said, to use things that were turned out by the gross, each the exact counterpart of all its hundred and forty-three fellows; when each might have its individuality, each might bear the imprint of its maker's hand—even the mark of his defects.

In pursuance of this principle, the brother and sister, when they had found themselves alone

in the world, and decided to set up housekeeping together, had furnished all their needs from second-hand shops, not without incredible chafferings: for Chippendale's animus against the huckstership of trade had never warped, but indeed had rather stiffened his sense that one must meet greed with stubbornness. So he would pay no more than what the higgling of the market might allow, for what he purchased. Thus their chairs were of old oak and of mahogany, dark with age, and ran in small sets or mere pairs. Their table was a treasure—heavy, massive and solid on its turned legs: Will had carried it home, unashamed, on his back, from the shop, having demanded (and obtained) a reduction of its price in consideration of this labour, which (he pointed out to the amused broker) saved cartage. Their tableware was a joy to look upon, though few plates or dishes matched: all were good and beautiful china or old earthenware, and their highly miscellaneous tumblers, many of them, were of delightfully-cut crystal: some had remnants of surface-gilding—a forgotten beauty. The carpet of the chamber which served them for dining and sitting-room was an admirable square of rich pile. Mary had sewn it together in many laborious evenings, from a roll of rare Oriental stair-carpet, "picked up" by herself at an auction in Leicester Square. A huge bureau, with a glass-fronted bookcase of many oddly-shapen panes, over it, occupied nearly all the space between the open windows. It was of mahogany, bright

with faithful rubbing, and had long drawers with brass handles of a forgotten pattern; a little oval of satin-wood inlaying embellished the centre of the sloping lid, which hinged down for writing, upon two slides contrived beneath to pull out for its support. The fender and the fire-irons were an equal joy to look upon, and brightly polished; while for over-mantel they had an enormous looking-glass in a carved oval frame, whose gilding would still have made the sort of new frame which enterprising shopkeepers run up for the unwary look extremely foolish.

It was Mary's part, as a rule, to moderate her brother's excesses, when he denounced "business" as at present conducted, with indiscriminating largeness.

"It is very well for you to say that trade is all trickery," Mary had said, in answer to some remark of Will's, "but you can carry your idea too far. There is a point where you will find that you are railing against all progress."

"Not at all. I am railing against dishonest progress," he protested.

"Rail on," said Dartring, who had not entered the argument, preferring (as he generally did) to listen, and be amused in his taciturn way by the intellectual antics of these enthusiasts.

"You've to remember," said Mary, "that what was possible when England contained fewer people than London does now, wouldn't work at the present day. If we had to depend on windmills for our flour, you would have us starving in a week."

"Not if you had enough windmills," said her brother. "If we hadn't introduced steam-grinding, we should have built enough windmills."

"And flour would have stood at the price it fetched a hundred years ago," said Mary.

"Precisely: and farmers would have prospered instead of failing——"

"While there wouldn't have been enough food to feed the present population."

"Well, you take an extreme case," said Chipendale, who saw that he had been led into a false position. "But that wasn't what I was speaking of. It was the continual trickery and over-reaching that is set up by the divorce of commerce from manufacture. Take a watchmaker, for instance. In our father's time a watchmaker was a man who made watches—and made 'em well. Look at this, Stanton."

He took out a fat silver watch, its case smooth with friction, and its stout glass a little dulled by wear.

"It was my father's watch," he explained. "Spring covers weren't invented. The case jams so tight that it hardly needs cleaning once in six or seven years. The hands are 'set'—when they want altering, which isn't often, unless I forget to wind it—from the front: you have to open the glass, so. Well, the man that sold my father that watch made it with his own hands. Here's his name, 'Thos. Aley, Knightsbridge. No. 777.' The man who calls himself a watchmaker nowadays is only a man who sells,

and can, perhaps, just clean, factory-made watches. Consequently, when you go to buy watches, it isn't with a man who knows every wheel in them that you have to deal—a man who makes and loves watches—but a huckster, who buys other men's work to sell again and make a profit out of it; and who, the chances are, will sell you a Swiss watch for an English one, if he can, even if he knows the difference. A man was prosecuted for that the other day."

"Oh, absurd!" said Mary. "Of course the man knows where the goods came from; and he isn't necessarily a humbug because he isn't a craftsman."

"But he has more temptation to be a humbug," said Chippendale.

"All the more reason for him to be treated fairly until you know he is a humbug," Mary replied. "There you are again; you think that people need to be swaddled: you would deny all moral fibre to everyone. If there is temptation, it does a man good, if he has any good in him, to have temptation to resist."

"And what about the maker, what about the craftsman?" pursued her brother. "So far as machinery leaves him room to be anything but a machine himself, he is utterly degraded by your commercial system. He makes watches by the hundred. He never sees them used. You deprive him of the joy of the completed work. He never sees his handiwork bringing its price, and being used and valued by the purchaser. He is deprived of all pleasure in his

work: it is nothing to him if his watches go well or ill: he gets his wages. Our father's watch-maker saw his handiwork in use: it came back to him from time to time, to be cleaned, and made perfect again, as it left his hand. A man like that was a sort of artist."

"Well, all workmen can't be artists," said Mary.

"They can, in their way: and they are, when they get a chance," Chippendale replied. "Wasn't a potter an artist? When he lifted the clay from his wheel and carried it to the furnace to bake, some mark that his thumb made on the edge was made as permanent as the completed work itself. I should like to see you show me a thumb-mark on one of your papers or account books, or the penholders you sell by the hundred gross. You'd reject them for being irregular. You know you would.

"And what is the consequence?" he went on. "It is the destruction of all morality. The manufacturer exploits the worker: the worker exploits the apprentice, or exploits his own children—'half-timers.' The workman lives in misery, and is paid the minimum of what he will take rather than starve. He works because he can't live without working: yet he is indispensable to his master—just as indispensable as his master to him. Why should one get all the profit, whatever it may be, while the other, no matter what the profit is, gets only what will keep him from starving and no more?"

"He doesn't get any more because he hasn't

the intelligence to earn more," Mary replied. "If he received more for a week's work than he needs for a week's 'keep,' he would remain idle, or worse, the next week. He only gets the minimum wage because he will only give the minimum work."

"You assume that he will only give that: Ruskin is always railing at that view of commerce. Treat every man as if he would rob you if he dared, and every man *will* rob you if he dares. Exploit him, and he will exploit you."

"Well, it pretty often happens that a good master is exploited," Mary admitted. "Our place is an example of *that*."

Stanton's eyes widened. "I don't understand what you mean by that, Miss Chippendale," he said.

"I mean," she replied, "that a good deal of time is wasted in that office by idling and talking. Because no one is driven, everyone wastes time."

"But the work is done," Stanton objected. "Nothing is neglected; and, as Lucraft says, 'you're none the more thought of for doing too much.'"

"None the more thought of!" Mary echoed scornfully. "Don't you see that it isn't what other people think of you that matters, but what you think of yourself? How can a man respect himself who takes money for a day's work and only does about half a day's work? The work out there could all be done by a couple of clerks, if they worked hard all day, instead of playing and gossiping."

“And some of the ‘gossip’ isn’t very improving, I suspect,” Chippendale interjected.

Stanton, who knew what was meant, reddened. “Still,” he said, “we are there. You wouldn’t have us throw up our situations, saying that there isn’t enough work for five?”

“Well, it’s a question whether, in strict right, you oughtn’t to,” Mary replied, wrinkling her brow in thought. “But I will tell you what you all *could* do. You could occupy the time by doing the work better. You could fill it up by doing everything as *well* as you possibly can. You said, the other day, that you wished you were capable of artistic work, rather than the drudgery of clerking. Well, any work—I don’t care what it is—is artistic work, if one does it with a determination to do it as well as it possibly can be done.”

“What! Indexing letter-books? Writing out invoices? Copying letters?”

“Certainly. You write a hand that is beautiful, at its best. You have time to write always your best. Even copying letters in the press can be done well or badly. A letter-book that is well kept isn’t a beautiful thing perhaps: it isn’t an image or a picture. But it is neat, and clean, and handsome, and unsmudged.”

“Accidents—” Stanton began, apologetically.

“Accidents need not happen when there is ample time to be careful. To do work as well as one can, makes it artistic work. It makes it pleasant. You are always discovering new methods of perfection. Another thing which

you might do, is to find opportunities for learning something of the goods that we sell. Paper, for instance, is a most fascinating study: there's a great deal more in paper than many people suppose. Do you know what this paper is called, for instance?"

She went to a vast portfolio which lay on a side table and took out of it a sheet of paper about two feet by three feet in size. Stanton went over with her and held it in his hands.

"Drawing paper, isn't it?" he luminously suggested.

"You have great powers of penetration! There's a pretty answer for a man who is writing in account books about paper all day long! It's a hundred and two pound 'not' colombier—a hand-made drawing paper of the best kind, thirty-four inches and a quarter long, twenty-three inches and a half wide. 'Not' means that the surface is only half-smoothed. The other sizes are demy, medium, royal, super-royal, elephant, imperial, atlas, double elephant and an old-fashioned size called antiquarian."

"How on earth do you know all that?" Stanton inquired, with astonishment.

"I learned it by keeping my eyes open."

"But you have no use for it in your work."

"No; perhaps not. But it makes my work interesting instead of its being dull. It would be worth your while—much more so than mine, practically—and, what is more, it would do away with the tedium of your work, if you took the trouble to learn the technical properties of

what you invoice and enter-up. You would enjoy what you do, instead of hating it, if, instead of studying how to get through it with as little trouble as possible, you preferred to study how well it could be done, and how much you could learn about it. It is the only honest way to work. We have no right to exploit our employer, even if he exploited us."

"Oh, he doesn't," Stanton admitted. "He isn't a nigger-driver. Schneider would like to be, but the governor isn't."

"No, and the firm doesn't treat the clerks as they treat *it*," Mary went on. "Everyone is paid more than he would get, if the cheapest labour obtainable were employed, as it is in some places."

"By the way," Chippendale interposed, taking up a subject which Mary had some time before announced her intention of probing, "where were you before you came to Mr. Douglas's, Stanton?"

Stanton flushed. "In a draper's shop in South Camberwell," he said.

"Did they treat you as well there as they do at Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender's?" Chippendale asked.

"Well," said Stanton, "the work was different. The hours were longer, you know. The employés lived in."

"What do you mean—they lived in the shop?"

"The girls lived over the shop. The men slept in another house. The firm provided their food."

"Good food?" Mary asked.

Stanton again reddened. He remembered that the food had not been thought by Mr. Borlase good for his adoptive son's health."

"Not very," he replied.

"What did they give you?"

"Bread and butter for breakfast," said Stanton, concealing his own preferential treatment: "boiled meat and pudding for dinner, bread and butter for tea."

"Good?"

Stanton shook his head. "I'm afraid the grub wasn't very grand," he said.

"And the sleeping accommodation? I've heard dreadful things about the lodging of shop-assistants."

"The rooms were rather small," Stanton said, "and rather too crowded."

"Were the assistants healthy? Did they like their work?"

"They hated it," Stanton was able to reply, with a vivid remembrance of his own sensations. "They weren't very strong-looking," he added.

"Not enough air, too much gas, no exercise," Chippendale commented, stretching a muscular leg, and looking at his sister. "Was it a profitable business?"

"Oh, yes; I should think so. Yes, certainly. There wasn't a great percentage of profit on individual articles, but there was so much sold that the shop must have brought in a tidy sum every week."

"And the assistants were sweated?" Chippendale commented.

"No worse than other shops," Stanton replied. Concealing, as he felt bound in honour, bound by his guardian's order to conceal, his own relation to the Emporium, he nevertheless also felt that this relation forbade him to leave it undefended.

"No worse than others," Chippendale commented, "but pretty bad. Is that why you left?"

"No. I left because— I left to get experience in wholesale business," he explained. "Perhaps I—" He stopped. One effect of his intercourse with the Chippendales had been to make him franker, less secretive, less ready to hide by furtive falsehood anything he did not wish, or felt himself unable, to reveal. "Perhaps," he said at length, with a moral courage he would probably not have been capable of some weeks earlier, "I may go back there some day."

"Why, do you like it better than Mr. Douglas's?" Mary asked in surprise.

Embarrassed, but still determined to be truthful, Stanton said: "No; I didn't. But when I go back I shall have a better position. There is something about it that I am not at liberty to tell anyone," he concluded. "I am not in quite the same position as the other assistants. If I went back I should have a share in the management, I believe."

Mary looked puzzled, and not pleased. "And help to oppress them?" she asked.

Stanton reddened afresh. "No one is obliged to stay who doesn't want to," he said.

"Well, if you are not free to talk about it, you mustn't," Mary said. "If you do go back and do share in the management, I hope you will manage it more fairly."

"Meantime," Stanton said, "I shall certainly do what you say—about my own work, I mean. I never saw it in just that light before."

"Well, it is honest to do one's best for one's master, if one is taking wages," Mary concluded sententiously; "and it is honest to treat one's employés fairly if one pays wages. That's the only way the world is likely to move forward. Where employers treat their workpeople like beasts of burden, and workpeople do all they can to deceive and cheat their masters, there is no progress—only retrogression. A man can at least do his best, whatever his position."

Chippendale elevated his brows at these maxims. "'Good sentences, and well pronounced,'" he quoted.

"They would be better if well followed," Mary answered him, smiling.

CHAPTER XX

NEW WORK

ONE thing that the Chippendales did for Stanton was to impart to him a needed increment of self-respect. Mary required very little time to perceive his intrinsic superiority to Peters and Thurlow, and imparted her sense of it to Chippendale. "He's a boy of a very different type," she said. "He has something in him."

Stanton justified her faith in him. He propounded to Peters, but without ascribing it to her, Miss Chippendale's theory of artistic office work. Mr. Peters rudely replied, "Rats!" and repeated Stanton's views to Lucraft. The latter shrugged his shoulders.

Of him, and of his superior will, Stanton was in much awe. He knew Lucraft's distaste for the lady of the keys. Consequently, he did not reveal his own ripening regard for and acquaintance with her. He never, indeed, enjoyed exhibiting sentiments objectionable to other people. Lucraft's masterful reprehension of all that displeased or might inconvenience him, was a thing which all the clerks dreaded: he had a bitter tongue, and withheld no comment that could be wounding to those who opposed him. It was a personal grievance against himself that

anyone should (as he termed it) crawl into favour, by undue diligence, or even by doing work too well. The greater pains which Stanton began to take displeased him.

Finding that he had not time to copy the letters as carefully as he now wished to do, if he left them all until the half hour before post-time, Stanton began, after two or three days, to collect them just after lunch, when he usually had an interval of leisure, Mr. Schneider being still out, to talk with and be amused by Lucraft, or join in general conversation. Lucraft took no notice of Stanton's new manoeuvre for a day or two; but presently he remarked upon it.

The office staff was entirely free, Mr. Douglas having gone out on business, and the book-keeper having taken advantage of this to enlarge his own absence. Peters and Thurlow were engaged, under the lid of the latter's desk, in a game of draughts, the implements of which had been purchased, some weeks before Stanton's arrival, by joint subscription. Edmund Douglas was continuing his resumed studies in the art of stenography under the eye of Miss Chippendale. Stanton stood alone by the press, carefully placing damp macintosh sheets in the book, overlaying them with the thin leaves, and placing the letters in position. Presently Lucraft, who found himself without companionship, strolled softly up, always with a provident eye on the green baize door of the typewriting office.

"Hallo!" he said. "It isn't post-time, is it?"

"No," replied Stanton. "But I've nothing

to do, so I thought I might as well get on with the letters "

"What for?"

"Saves time, later."

"There's always plenty of time. I don't see any busting hurry."

"Well, it's rather a rush at half-past five," said Stanton, apologetically; "and they are apt to get smudged and put in crooked."

"Anyone been complaining?"

"No."

"Then why won't 'good-enough' do?"

"There's no harm, that I can see, in doing them as well as possible."

"Oh, no. On the contrary, it's an advantage. It will get you in favour with the governor, if he sees how much more particular you are about your work than other people. I should take the book in and show him, if I were you." Lucraft threw out the suggestion with a sneer. "You can show him how much better it looks than Peters's work."

"I'll leave that for you to do," Stanton replied, nettled, forgetting his usual awe of Lucraft.

"Oh, I'm not a crawler," said the latter.

"Do you mean to insinuate that I am?" Stanton enquired.

Lucraft walked nearer to him with an evil face. "Look here," he said, "you've come to the wrong shop if you think you can round on me. We want no sneaking on these premises. If you think you can crawl into the governor's

good graces by setting yourself up as a pattern to your betters, you make a mistake."

He had raised his voice. Peters and Thurlow had stopped in their game and were listening, with uneasy looks. Lucraft was much feared by his associates.

Stanton, his hand nervously unsteady, was fumbling on with his work—very red, very uncomfortable, very indignant, but without words. His old inability to "stick up" for himself troubled him. Lucraft was a controversialist far beyond his strength.

"I wonder what you would think," the latter pursued venomously, "if you had welcomed a new man into your office, and put him up to all the ways of the place, he taking it all in and pretending to be a friend, and then, as soon as he thought he knew everything, found him setting to work to get you blamed, or have your work contrasted with his own? What would you call him? And then rounding like a dog that bites the hand that feeds it? Pouf! I don't wonder you turn red. I should think you're ashamed of yourself."

"I'm not, then," said Stanton, under his breath.

"What's that you say, you crawler?"

"I say I'm not red."

"You're a liar, you are! Go and look in the glass."

"I have no desire to look in the glass."

"Oh"—mimicking Stanton's tremulous tone—"you've no d-desire to l-look in the glass,

haven't you? I've a good mind to ram your nose through it. Why, I've broken a man's jaw for rounding on me. Who are you? Why, you didn't know an oil-sheet from a damper when you came here——"

The door of Miss Chippendale's room opened as he spoke. Without the pause of a moment, Lucraft changed his tone and went on, as if continuing a sentence, "so that you see, if you take care to have all the under-rubbers damped evenly at the beginning, and put the book evenly in the press, you won't find that the water squeezes out and makes the ink run."

Just here Edmund Douglas passed them. Looking up, with a feigned start of surprise: "Oh, I didn't see you, Mr. Edmund," Lucraft said. "I have just been suggesting to Stanton that if he copies part of the letters in the middle of the day he'll have time to do them better."

"Were you?" was Edmund's comment. "I thought he'd been doing so all the week. It's a very good plan. By the way, I wish you'd get last month's postage-book balanced. I see it hasn't been added up for three weeks or more."

"Hasn't it, really? Oh, I'm sorry," replied Lucraft. "The fact is that I've been rather busy with the sample book: Pinkerton has sent home a good many renewal-demands lately."

"Indeed?" said Edmund again. "I hadn't noticed that fact either. We'll look into it presently, together. But, in the meantime, you might go to the bank, as Mr. Schneider hasn't got back. He made up the paying-in slips this

morning. I fancy Stanton can manage the letters alone."

"Certainly," said Lucraft; "I was only helping him as he asked me to."

Stanton did not contradict him. Indeed, at no stage of his life at Douglas's would he have done so. But as the time went on, he developed a more independent spirit, and lost much of his fear of Lucraft. The latter, who was not at all desirous of keeping up a feud which might give him enemies where he needed friends—for Edmund Douglas had begun to see through his speciousness of late, and was much less inclined than before to confide in Lucraft—resumed most of his old manner towards Stanton when they next came into contact. To be sulky, indeed, was not in his temper, which was purely selfish, and was rarely allowed by him to stand in the way of his own interests. But, scenting danger in Stanton's new diligence, which, he perceived, might easily bring the latter into too much favour, he talked less to him, and treated him with less confidence than he had before been inclined to show. He inwardly despised all his colleagues—Peters and Thurlow for their stupidity and dullness, Stanton for being timid and unformed. But, as I have said, he had no intention of isolating himself. There was safety in numbers, and Edmund Douglas's attitude already caused him uneasiness.

Stanton meanwhile employed leisure time in the office, no longer occupied by playing with Lucraft, in cultivating every opportunity for the

acquisition of technical knowledge. The head warehouseman, Pym, was an old paper-maker, overflowing with the lore of the process. As soon as he found Stanton interested in this knowledge, Pym became garrulously instructive. There is no surer way of acquiring a craftsman's regard, and of making him interesting, than to set him on to talk of his own work. Few men fail to respond to such a stimulus, and before long Stanton took on the habit of spending with the warehouseman every minute he could spare, examining the various kinds of paper which Pym handled, and being initiated into the mysteries of wood-pulp, rope, manila, esparto, straw and other unexpected constituents of paper, its sizes from pott to double-elephant, and what distinctions of "coarse" and "fine," "laid" and "wove" differentiate it. He learned what papers came from abroad and what greatly superior "printings," "writings," "royal hands" and "browns" were made in different parts of England and Scotland, picked up some skill in estimating their weights and detecting their qualities, and, by observing the peculiarities of the firms whom Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender supplied, learned to what uses various kinds of paper are put.

Outside the office he saw more and more of the Chippendales, who liked him, and liked the influence which they perceived themselves to exert upon him. He confided to William Chippendale a certain amount of his awe of Lucraft: no young man in his position would have owned

to all of it. The sculptor did not laugh at him. Neither did he call upon Stanton (as Wicksted constantly did) for a more forcible courage than he possessed. He despised Lucraft as a bully and a knave, and was in reality largely the author of Stanton's growing hatred of him—a hatred which with difficulty survived Lucraft's engaging manners, his ordinarily irrefragable good humour. For the latter, when, after one or two attempts, he found that he could neither bully nor cajole Stanton back into the first lax ways, really began to respect this unforeseen and growing manliness. As the months passed on, his unconscious esteem for Stanton conveyed itself, as by a sort of infection, to Peters and Thurlow. These two perceived that Stanton was better educated, better informed than themselves: Lucraft's ascendancy was so remarkable that they did not think of comparing Stanton with him.

The latter was far from seeking to obtrude his acquisitions upon his superiors. Edmund, indeed, once or twice embarrassed Stanton by discovering him in the warehouse, deep in technical research with Pym. Stanton, blushing, went away. Mr. Schneider, observant of his absences, developed a habit of sending for, and one day rebuked him. Edmund was at his desk, and presently came up, and heard the end of the conversation. Stanton had been dismissed on an unnecessary errand.

When he was gone, young Douglas spoke of some other matter to Schneider. The latter,

nervous as usual, reverted to the incident just closed.

"Der boy is too mooch in der paper-room playing," he remarked. "He waste an hour dere efery afternoon, Mister Etmundt."

"Did you need him?" Douglas asked.

"I wanted som' bill stamps from der post-office bringing," said the book-keeper uneasily, aware that his errand for Stanton had been, in reality, factitious. "Som' two shilling stamp, for der draft on Walker."

"Why, I thought we had a full stock of bill stamps," Edmund commented. "I don't want to meddle," he went on, "but from what I have seen of him downstairs, I don't think he is wasting his time. Anyway, there is not very much for him to do in the afternoon, from three to four, and he would only be idling about if he were up here. I think we might give him the job of keeping the stock book, Mr. Schneider. Pym isn't much of an arithmetician, and as Stanton seems to have a taste for the warehouse, he might as well do it. What do you think?"

"Oh," replied the book-keeper, who was always ready to grumble, regarding that exercise as a vindication of his own importance, "it iss very true dot der stogk pook is made fery badt. Vhen I make up der journal, vot no one oonderstandt, I haff endless off trooble mit der invoices-checking."

"Well, then, I think I can see ways of helping you with it," Edmund replied. "We'll take it out of Pym's hands—he has too much to do

now—and let Stanton try what he can make of it. I'm very glad, Mr. Schneider," he concluded diplomatically, "that you mentioned the matter. It is important that you should have all the assistance possible."

Mr. Schneider, thus appeased, beamed affably. Edmund, with his quick eye and quiet faculty of observation, had used to advantage the opportunities which his position gave him for improving office arrangements. Without exciting animosity, he had contrived to make himself a power in the establishment.

As well as raw material, the house of Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender dealt in printed matter of certain sorts—atlasses, gazetteers and other books of reference not handled by the ordinary kind of publishers. Stanton, in the course of his new duties, which he very cheerfully embraced, learned something of printing. The firm did not possess a typographical plant, and the compilation of the books it sold was done outside. But in a well-lighted corner of the warehouse a middle-aged man, whose powerfully lensed spectacles made his eyes look curiously fat, corrected proofs submitted by the printers. With him, Stanton often foregathered, and found him, like all "readers," strangely intelligent, accurate and well-informed. He learned here something of how books are printed and bound, and one day obtaining a couple of hours' leave, accompanied the "reader" to the printing office from which the latter had come to Mr. Douglas, and was

shown these processes in practical operation.

Some months after he had been entrusted with the stock book, in his keeping of which even Mr. Schneider found nothing to complain of, Stanton's researches came suddenly under the observation of his employer.

Mr. Douglas occupied a large room on the first floor—a room rather characteristic of him in its furnishing. He had a utilitarian abhorrence of anything not absolutely essential. The walls were papered with a perfectly plain, patternless green. He sat at a cylinder-topped mahogany desk, with a few labelled pigeon holes. On the leather-covered writing-surface, adjusted to the usual slope—he could never write on anything except at this angle—lay a half-quire of blotting-paper. Beside it, on the level, were a small ink-bottle, and a pen tray, containing a single pen, with which, in his small, cramped writing, legible as any print, he wrote such matters as required his own pen; beside his chair stood a small table for Miss Chippendale, at which, during fixed hours every day—for no clock was ever more regular in its habits than Mr. Douglas—she took down in shorthand such letters as he chose to dictate. The rooms, with the exception of a couple of chairs for callers—who were received only at stated hours—was otherwise almost ascetically empty. The kamptuliconed floor had a square Wilton carpet in the middle and there was an office folding washstand behind a curtain in one corner, where also were a few coat-hooks and an umbrella stand.

Even the usual array of india-rubber stamps was absent, Mr. Douglas having a curious prejudice against these implements.

Here, one Saturday morning, Stanton, in the absence of Lucraft, whose business it properly was, received some instructions from Mr. Douglas on the subject of a new gazetteer, just then on the point of being sent to press.

He had been sent for a sheet of the paper intended to be employed for this. Mr. Douglas held the sample to the light, examined its surface and tore off a corner in a peculiar manner, so as to expose a jagged edge.

"Bring me a glass of water, please," he said.

Stanton obeyed. Mr. Douglas dipped the fragment in it for an instant, and examined the surface.

"Yes, I think this will do," he decided. "But I must know the weight. Will you get Pym to put a sheet on the scale?"

"Pym is out, sir," Stanton replied. "But I put it on the scale myself. It is"—he mentioned the weight—"so many pounds perfect."

Mr. Douglas looked at him with some interest. "Why did you think of doing that?" he inquired.

"I expected that you would want to know, sir."

"H'm. That was rather thoughtful of you. But you said 'perfect'? Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes, sir: the paper-maker's scale in the warehouse shows it. It's a quire and a half over the mill ream."

"Who told you that? It's quite right."

"Pym, sir." Stanton blushed under this interrogation.

Mr. Douglas concluded his instructions, but did not forget the incident. A week or two later a rearrangement of certain work became necessary, and Stanton was preferred to a position superior to that of either Peters or Thurlow, and, indeed, quite equal to Lucraft's. Peters, to his intense disgust, had the stock book given him to keep, and was, in addition, called upon to attend to the letter-book. A deferential hint to Mr. Edmund that an office boy would now be desirable, to take up Stanton's former duties, received an inhospitable reception. "I think you'll be able to find time," said Edmund, "if you adopt Stanton's plan of dividing the work into two parts. There is a slack hour after two, if you get back punctually from your lunch."

Stanton's superiority in intelligence to both of the colleagues he had overpassed was so fully accepted that neither of these found his preferment extraordinary.

It was not for want of having their supersession pointed out to them that they submitted to it, unprotesting. Mr. Schneider kindly saw to that. Especially he did his best to sow jealousy when, as he had in reality anticipated, he was bidden to increase Stanton's wages on the pay sheet. Mr. Douglas never increased a clerk's responsibility without thus marking his sense of the merit which had warranted the step.

"It iss somet'ing what hass nefer been heard

off," Schneider remarked to the trio, after Stanton had left on the first Saturday after this operation. "Eferbotty geds a rise from time to time, as regarts dat is goncernt. But dooble! Vhen you tink Mr. Douglas going to dooble your screw, Mr. T'urLOW?"

"I dono," replied the latter, through his irregular teeth. "Not much chance, seemingly."

Mr. Schneider sniffed. "Of coorse, if you like it, shentlemen," he commented, "dat iss all right. Finish. It doand affect me. I am paid, ass you know, in a differend manner." (Schneider was fond of adumbrating for himself, by such hints as this, a sort of secret partnership. He drew his large pay at irregular intervals, occasionally even drawing himself a three months' bill on the firm—a method of payment which his position as cashier enabled him to adopt. These bills he would ostentatiously exhibit with many a veiled hint, in moments of exhilaration.) "*Bud*," he continued, "id seems to me dat someone mighd make rebresendations to der gofernor, when he make fish from one und fowl from der oder, ass der prophet say."

This magnanimous hint was thrown away upon his hearers: all the more so as there was no earthly ground for anyone to complain. Although he was placed over his fellows, Stanton's augmented salary did not as yet rival that of the older men, which had grown by steady accretion at several Christmases.

He was, however, greatly delighted with it. Indulging himself in no luxuries beyond a more

frequent Saturday afternoon's boating—an exercise to which Chippendale had introduced him during the summer—he was able, by degrees, to replace some of his original capital of twenty pounds. A further increase of five shillings a week at Christmas accelerated this process. Before the year which Mr. Borlase had named had elapsed, the money was complete, and Stanton had bought himself a needed suit of clothes.

“I'm glad he's become a little less funereal in his costume,” Chippendale remarked to Mary after Stanton's first visit to them in his new garb—of which his choice had, in reality, been rather influenced by the tastes of the artistic community of which he had by degrees become a sort of visiting member.

“It is not the only way in which he is improved,” Mary replied. “You'll make a man of him yet, Will.”

“Yes. He's got a lot more backbone than he used to have,” Chippendale replied. “I'm glad he didn't remain under that beast Lucraft's thumb.”

CHAPTER XXI

STANTON'S RETURN

STANTON grew nearly an inch in height during that first year at Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender's, and gained a good deal in weight and muscularity. The river did wonders for him, and as his physical strength increased, his moral courage developed gradually with it—no rare phenomenon. The power he had developed of taking his own part against the world would have pleased Mr. Borlase greatly—would, indeed, have pleased that philanthropist a good deal more than some of the ethical doctrines which his ward imbibed, or thought out for himself, at the same time.

But of this there seemed to Stanton little danger. With all his growth, moral and physical, one obsession had ridden him too heavily, ever since the point at which memory began, to be easily weakened. Behind all his aspirations, behind all his hopes of future advancement in life, behind his pleasure, now somewhat degenerated, in the prospect of returning in April to what had, after all, been the home of all his life, the immense figure of Mr. Borlase sombrely brooded, waiting for him. He had always been implicitly bullied by Mr. Borlase. Admonition, exhortation, censure, had been his daily lot. He

had not often been found, as Mr. Borlase phrased it, "satisfactory." What reception would he meet with now? Would he now be satisfactory? Would the old place be, after all, so desirable as he had promised himself that it should be? Would he be allowed liberty, time for the one outdoor sport he had come to love, time for intercourse with the friends he had made? Stanton wondered. Mr. Borlase had complained of him that he never seemed to wish for anything of his own accord. Now that he had certain very ardent wishes, certain tastes that were important to his happiness, would his desires be regarded, they also, as a mark of improvement? Would they be "satisfactory?"

And what of the shop itself? To Stanton it seemed so long since he had entered it, that he could not always convince himself that he remembered his three months of working life there very accurately. Possibly he had exaggerated its miseries. He had been a pitiful sort of fool then, he reflected; it was not very surprising that Mr. Borlase had found fault with him. What, after all, had the place been like? The very incidents of his work were but dimly remembered, and Wicksted, who liked to forget all about the Emporium as soon as he conveniently could after leaving it, had not, for certain, refreshed Stanton's memory.

As the time drew nearer for his return to South Camberwell, Stanton, who at first had longed for its arrival with an almost cat-like in-habitiveness, was sensible of a diminution in his

ardour. It would not be fair to say of him that the easier circumstances in which he found himself, now that Mr. Borlase's money was made up and safely banked in the Post Office, determined this change. But, certainly, his need was less urgent, and we may set against the influence of this, the anticipation of a certain triumph, which he began to foretaste when he first found income exceeding expenditure; it would be pleasant enough, he then reflected, to walk into the shop (perhaps in a new suit of clothes) punctually on the day appointed, and say to Mr. Borlase: "I have come back. Here are your twenty pounds. What now?"

During the month of March, this year, the impulse came to Stanton to take a walk in South Camberwell occasionally, and covertly look at the shop: he had developed a taste for long walks, with other strenuous indulgences. He did not care to loiter in the neighbourhood: Mr. Borlase must not observe him hanging about. But on Thursday evening—the night of early closing—Mr. Borlase was in the habit, either of staying indoors altogether, mortifying a taste for literature with the columns of the local *Mercury*, or else of going entirely away, to enjoy himself elsewhere.

Accordingly, on one or two Thursdays when Mr. and Mrs. Wicksted had not arranged to visit him, Stanton walked rapidly through Peckham Lane, to glance at the still decorated and illuminated windows, and up at the sombre warehouse which abutted upon the shop on the

Camera Street side, one storey lower than the front building. Afterwards, he would stroll at more leisure through Denmark Street, where the dirty-windowed house stood that was dedicated to the lodging of Mr. Borlase's young men. The neighbourhood in time, came to have almost a fascination for him, and once he actually braved all contingencies to give himself the opportunity of seeing what the Emporium looked like when it was open and busy.

But it was on none of these occasions that the ironic fates at length ingeniously precipitated his momentous recrossing of the threshold. Stanton's lodging, it may be remembered, was south of the Thames, so that he slept every night within a couple of miles distance, as the crow flies, of his guardian. One fine evening—the evening, to be precise, of Lady Day—Stanton had been attracted by the advertisement of a South London playhouse, one of the pioneers of the Suburban Theatre movement. Peters, as a matter of fact, had been the unconscious instrument of the Fates; he had pointed out the determining announcement, and suggested that they should visit the home of Thespis (he did not apply that term to it) in company. It is an additional irony, so jocose is destiny, that the dramatic composition which tempted them was a comic play.

Nearly at the end of the third (and last) Act—all comic plays appear to be in three Acts—the audience was disturbed several times by the noise of some heavy vehicle rapidly driven past,

to the accompaniment of raucous shouts and a loud popular commotion. As the two young men emerged from the pit-door another of these disturbances occurred—a fire-engine drove past in full shout. “Ey! Ey! Ey! Ey!” cried the warning firemen, clinging to the side straps, in their brass helmets. Stanton and Peters, amused and in good spirits, saw nothing better to do than to follow the engine at their best pace, along with other ardent youths.

Turning up Rye Lane, it led them to a district familiar enough to Stanton; and now the sky before them was red with reflected fire, and the hurrying crowd began to exchange conjectures and receive rumours. It was a good fire, they assured each other!

Where Peckham Lane made a sharp corner, near the Rye, rumour solidified into definite statement. The fire was at Borlase & Company's.

Already the road was awash with water from a standpipe, and the rapid grunt, grunt of a steam-pumping engine told the lads that the hose was at work. A dense crowd, kept at bay by the admirable cordon of the quick police, shouted and laughed, wet-footed. As well as Stanton could see, above the multitudinous bowler hats before him, the fire seemed to be raging in the upper part of the building only—fiercer at the two sides than in the middle. Dense smoke was pouring from the first floor windows; higher, the smoke was mingled with innumerable flakes of bright yellow incandes-

cence, like crumpled gold-leaves, wavering upwards towards the sky. Nothing could be seen of the water that was being urged through the hose; but a constant hiss, and clouds of steam on the street level, indicated that the firemen were at work.

The police began to enlarge the space kept vacant before the building. "Look out," cried one of them. "The walls are coming down."

The crowd, easily frightened, as any crowd is, broke and stumbled backwards. Stanton—separated from Peters—found his opportunity and stood his ground, thridding the startled mob. A sudden fear, a sudden sense of responsibility attacked him.

"Is Mr. Borlase there?" he asked, flinging the question all round him. Peters, a few yards off, heard and wondered at it.

"'Ow do I know?" a man answered, laughing. "'Ere git ert er the waiy." But Stanton pressed farther forward.

"Where's the fire-escape?" Stanton demanded of some one.

"There ain't no fire-escape. The girls is all out," said a draggle-hatted woman.

He gave a sigh of relieved anxiety. By this time he had reached the row of policemen. The salvage-men were carrying out bales of cloth and calico. Apparently, the threat of the police respecting the walls had been a mere ruse to secure more space for the firemen to work in. Stanton tried to pass the cordon, but a policeman put out an inflexible elbow and stopped

him. "Let me come through," he said, "I am Stanton Borlase. Is Mr. Borlase here?"

A police-sergeant heard him, and drawing one of his men aside, pulled Stanton through the rank. "No, sir," he said. "He was not in the house; and we understand that he has gone to town."

"Where are the assistants?" asked Stanton. "Were they in bed?"

"Yes. They got out in their night-clothes, most of them," said the sergeant. "We put them into the public-house at the corner."

"Has the safe been got out, then?" Stanton inquired.

"Too heavy," said the sergeant, shaking his head. "But the fire is mostly up stairs. The safe won't hurt. The men are getting out as much stock as they can from behind. The warehouse is bound to catch."

A disturbance among the crowd at the end of the line, now called the sergeant away. The row of police had been momentarily broken, and three or four roughs were being hustled out of the open space. Stanton watched this process inattentively. The astonished Peters, who had observed his colloquy with the police, tried in vain to reach him, and share the advantages of his position. But Stanton, it seemed, had forgotten all about his companion. His mind, cool and thoughtful, was concentrated on the results of this fire. His anxiety about the safe marked his appreciation of one of them. The amount of money—at all events the quantity of destruct-

ible bank-notes, postal orders and stamps—would be trifling. But the books were important. Without the books it would be impossible to learn just what stock was in the place. His mind naturally embraced his own special department—the checking of invoices and their entry in the stock-book. Yes! And the stock-book was never put away in the safe. It was a bulky volume and took up too much room to be accommodated there. In a flash of enlightenment, Stanton perceived that this particular book, and the invoices of the manufacturers and jobbers from whom Mr. Borlase purchased his supplies, would be all-important now. Forgetting danger as easily as he had forgotten the presence of Mr. Peters, he made, before that young man's neglected eyes, a sudden and valiant dash, jumping over the sinuous, canvas-covered hose, and ran through the shattered door of the shop.

“Where are you coming to? What's the police doing of?” inquired an emergent fireman indignantly.

“It's all right,” Stanton replied breathlessly. “My name's Borlase.” He passed through the door, into a dense mass of steam and of stifling smoke that made his eyes smart. There was a lurid illumination from the burning warehouse behind, and he, by its light, made his way without difficulty to Wicksted's desk. It was locked. He put his shoulder under the projecting lip of the lid and tried to force it. The good mahogany resisted. He stooped lower, and tried

again, using the muscles of his legs, the muscles by which we stand on tiptoe—the strongest set of muscles, Chippendale, learned in anatomy, had told him, in the human frame. Odd that this useful recollection should come back to him now! The desk flew up with a crash of splintered wood, the lock torn bodily from its place. He threw aside all the contents of the hinged desk and pulled out the book by its stout leather back. On a nail at the side hung a bulky apron-file, covered with green binding-cloth, which protected the unentered invoices, and with the file in his hand, and the vast ledger under his arm, he staggered out of the shop, tripping once on the hose.

The friendly police sergeant met him.

“Where can I stow these?” Stanton asked.
“They’re important.”

“Better take them to the ‘Denmark Arms,’” the sergeant suggested, and, detailing a couple of his men to force a passage for Stanton, he went back to his duty.

At the public-house an excited landlord received him, introduced by the police as Mr. Borlase, Junior, and readily took charge of his salvage. While the book and papers were being put under lock and key, as Stanton demanded, a loud crash followed by a shout from the crowd and a scurrying of feet, caused the police to hasten out. Stanton caught them up and was helped through the crowd, which, indeed, he would hardly have penetrated alone.

The roof had fallen in, and the weight of a

couple of iron girders, crashing down upon the charred ceiling of the shop, had made the whole place a mass of brightly burning ruins, scarcely as high as the shop itself had been when Stanton rushed out of it three minutes earlier. A sudden chill at the spine seized him: we are rarely frightened while in danger; it is only after we have escaped that fear comes.

The firemen were being counted by their chief. One man was missing. The whole force of available water was directed into the centre of the blazing mass, and, the real bulk of the material being now small, quickly had effect. In a couple of minutes came a fresh *cmeute* at the back of the crowd, among which the news of a missing fireman had spread as quickly as fire itself. There was a confused shout, then a commotion, three or four men overturned, and a blackened fireman dashed into the open space, axe in hand.

"Where's Jim?" shouted the chief fireman.

"He's out. He's all right," replied the newcomer. "The top floor in Camera Street is standing. We broke the door out."

"That's all right," said the chief. "Get along and unbend that hose from the Lordship Lane steamer. It's no good now; it's clipped in the breakage. Bend the spare hose on: you need all the water you can get."

Stanton stood helpless. Then the late danger of the firemen put another thought into his mind, and he made his way slowly back through the crowd to the "Denmark Arms."

"Are all the girls here?" he asked the landlord.

"Not all of 'em," was the reply. "Seventeen. It's all we could take in. Some are next door. Some more across the street—at number five,"

"How many in all?" Stanton asked.

"Couldn't say. We've got seventeen here."

Stanton went to the next house. The door was open and a woman stood in the porch.

"I am Stanton Borlase," he said—he seemed to have been always saying this, to-night.

"How many of the assistants have you here?"

"Six," replied the woman. "A good many of 'em's at the 'Denmark Arms.' Some more at number five. They comed out in their night-gowns, or a skirt wropped round 'em mostly. They went in where they could."

Seventeen—six. That made twenty-three. There should be about six more then at the other house if everyone had been saved. Stanton crossed the street and knocked loudly at number five. One or two heads were protruded from the windows, and he recognised a girl of the shop. "How many of you there?" he called up.

"Four."

"Only four?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain. Why?"

"How many were there in the shop?"

"Thirty. Isn't everyone out?"

As this question came down from the window

the door opened and a girl clad in a man's ulster, and with a shawl over her head, stood before him.

"Why, is that you, sir?" she said. Then turned and called along the passage: "Miss Wilkinson, here's Mr. Stanton Borlase."

"Never mind Miss Wilkinson," Stanton replied. "I want to know how many young ladies went to bed at the shop last night."

The girl before him was silent, to think, pulling her top lip down with her finger and thumb, and fumbling at the pockets of her coat. "Let's see," she said. "Everybody, I think. I don't think there was anyone staying out."

The girl whom she had called joined them. "Yes, there was," she said. "I think Miss Beaton was out. She does sometimes go, you know, to her married sister's, at Nunhead."

"Yes, that's right, dear," the first girl agreed. "She *was* out. I remember now. Oh, Mr. Borlase, what *are* we all going to do to-morrow? No clothes, no nothing."

"I don't know," he replied impatiently.

"The thing is, now, to know whether any of you have been killed. Are there any girls anywhere but in these three houses—the public-house, the house next door to it and here?"

"We don't know, sir," Miss Wilkinson replied. She was a much more intelligent woman than her colleague in the ulster. "You see, we were all so frightened and so—so confused, running out into the street in our bedgowns, that we couldn't think of anything. But someone said everyone was out."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Who was it, Milly?"

"Everyone said so," the other girl replied.

"The governor wasn't in the house?" Stanton asked.

"No; he hadn't come back," said Miss Wilkinson. "Mrs. Dobson said he went out about ten o'clock. And now I remember, I think it was Mrs. Dobson that said everyone was out."

Stanton caught at this "Where is she—where is Mrs. Dobson?"

"I don't know. Not here. She must be at the 'Denmark Arms' or the other house."

Stanton left them and returned to the public-house—still wide open, in defiance of the law and of the near police force, though it was long after closing time. However, the beer engine had been secured by its padlocked brass rod, and all the lights except a couple in the side window were extinguished.

"Is the housekeeper here?" Stanton demanded of the proprietor—a short man with a husky voice and protuberant abdomen.

"Yes, sir; she's upstairs—gone to bed in one of the barmaids' rooms. She was in a frightful state when she come—nearly in a fit."

"She must be sent for, all the same," said Stanton.

"All right, sir. I'll call her."

Mrs. Dobson had evidently not gone to bed as the publican averred, for she promptly appeared, clad in a long waterproof belonging to the barmaid. She was in tears, wringing her

hands and trembling. "Oh, Mr. Borlase, sir," she broke out on seeing Stanton, whose appearance on the scene she treated as quite a matter of course. "Oh, Mr. Borlase, sir, Mr. Borlase!"

She sank into a chair in the bar-parlour, where Stanton had received her, and covered her face with a handkerchief, rocking herself to and fro.

"Oh," she wailed, "oh, the fire! Mr. Borlase! Oh, the fire! In my very bedroom, sir!" The invasion of this sacred apartment by indiscriminating flames seemed to absorb her whole consciousness—seemed to represent for her the last outrage of a cruel fate.

"Come, I want to speak to you," Stanton said.

She looked up, trembling and choking.

"Did you count the young ladies?" Stanton asked. "Is everyone out?"

He might have spared her the question. It was evident that she had been in depths of panic too great to let her think of anything but the extremity of her fear.

She made, indeed, no answer, covering her face again and sobbing, "Oh, the fire! the fire!"

"She *said* as everyone was out," the publican declared. "You said so, didn't you?"

The woman looked up. "Yes, yes, everyone was out," she replied vacantly, and dissolved in new floods.

"How do you know that everyone was out?" Stanton persistently demanded. "*Did* you count them?"

"Everyone—everyone. In their nightgowns, Mr. Borlase, sir. Everyone in their nightgowns, and me, too, sir, out of the fire."

"Yes, yes, they were in their nightgowns; but did you count them?"

"No, no. They came out. In their nightgowns," she insisted.

"You didn't count them? How do you know that they all came out? Was everyone at home at bedtime?"

"Yes, yes. Everyone. They all came——"

"Was Miss Beaton at home?"

"No, sir. She went out after the shop shut, to sleep out."

"Anyone else out?"

"No-o. No. All the rest——"

"There are two girls not accounted for, then," said Stanton sternly. "Unless any of them went somewhere else. Did you see where everyone went to?"

The publican answered for her. "She didn't see nothink, sir," he said in a low voice. "She was in such a taking that, in a manner of speakin', she didn't see nothink."

"Well, then, there are two girls burned!" said Stanton grimly. "I must go back to the house."

The crowd had melted away now, and of Borlase & Company's Emporium all that remained were the walls, blackened and drenched, and a vast mass of still steaming ruins.

"Has anything been heard of Mr. Borlase?" Stanton asked the head salvage corps man.

"He's been here, and gone away again," was the reply.

"He was terribly broken up," said a policeman, standing by. "'Everything gone?' he says. 'My books and everything? I'm ruined!' he says. 'I can't tell what my loss is,' he says."

"Do you know where he went?" Stanton asked.

The captain answered. "He said he would go across to the South Camberwell Hotel and get a bed there. Covered by insurance, I understand, sir?"

"Sure to be," Stanton replied succinctly. "But that's not the point. There are two girls missing."

"Why, we were told everyone was out."

"No one was seen at the windows, then?"

"Not a soul. If any didn't get out, they would have been suffocated by the smoke before the alarm was given."

"This is terrible!"

"They may have got away somewhere, sir. We can't say positively that they were killed. It often happens that someone disappears like that and turns up again next morning. I'll get all the stuff moved as quickly as I can in the morning: but there's no touching it now. The firemen have mostly gone away. They've nothing to do with us, you know. There was another call just as the owner left—a private dwelling house in East Dulwich, and the men were sent off."

"Isn't it possible to do anything? Are you sure?"

"We might try."

"Do, for God's sake! I can't go away until we know."

"You can't be sure, to-night, sir, unless—unless we found something. There's no possibility otherwise. The worst is the only thing you can find."

"Well, let us try. Let us at least see what can be found. They couldn't possibly be alive still?"

"Not possibly, under all that. If you'll wait a while, I will see what can be done."

The officer hurried off, and Stanton paced up and down before the ruins, watching the difficult process of pulling down and dragging off masses of damp, hot merchandise. By degrees, he became aware that he was cold, and that his boots were squidgy with wet. He went, after a while, to the "Denmark Arms" again, now closed, awakened the obliging landlord by loud knocking, and obtained food. When he returned, work on the ruins had ceased. The salvage-corps men were gathered in a grave-faced knot. Yes. They had indeed found the only certainty that the salvage-corps officer had said could be found. They had found the worst.

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Mr. Peters, meanwhile, had gone disconsolately home. The Whebles had been in bed a long time. It was only in the morning that,

coming into the kitchen to recount the night's events, he enjoyed their delighted audience.

"It was a rum affair, altogether," he said, at the end. "Stanton, that chap from the office, that came in with me on our way to the theatre, you know, seemed to know something about it, because—what I mean—no sooner had we got there than he walks up to the head bobby, as bold as brass, and steps into the middle."

"Fancy!" said Prudence. "He seemed such a quiet young fellow."

"Well, he wasn't quiet last night," Mr. Peters averred. "He walked away from me and shoved himself clear into the middle of the firemen. I lost sight of him for a bit—there was an awful crowd—but presently I saw him go rushing right into the shop. It was only a minute before the roof fell in."

"Fancy!" Prudence repeated.

"What a nerve!" said Mrs. Wheble.

"Rushed in," said Mr. Peters, "and fetched something out. Then he went off the other way, and I didn't see any more of him. There was no more to see, so I came home. The people round about said, 'That's young Borlase!' But that must have been a mistake. Only I remembered then that he told me once he had been at Borlase's, because he asked me about my young brother. He used to be there, you know."

"But why did they say he was young Borlase?" Mrs. Wheble enquired.

"I dunno," Mr. Peters replied aggrievedly.

“It must have been a mistake. What I mean, I suppose they thought he must be some one connected with the firm from the way he took upon himself to break into the front of the policemen. He never looked back at me, nor asked me if I was coming, nor nothing,” Mr. Peters concluded.

“Just think of it!” said Prudence.

CHAPTER XXII

BORLASE & SON

ENQUIRY at the South Camberwell Hotel only eliciting from an aroused and slightly indignant porter the information that Mr. Borlase had "gone to bed long ago," Stanton made his way homeward to get what rest the remainder of the night might allow.

He rose in good time and hastened to the city. Here he asked of Edmund Douglas a day's leave, and had departed again before the arrival of the book-keeper, who usually came in, nowadays, at a quarter past nine.

The other clerks, also more punctual than of old, observed with surprise that Stanton did not hang up his hat, and that he closeted himself for some time with Mr. Edmund in the typewriter's room. As he passed out through the office, Lucraft called after him:

"Hullo! Going out again?"

"What's up? Ill?"

"No. I've got some private business to attend to."

Lucraft shrugged his shoulders. It was not thus curtly that Stanton would have answered such questions a year ago. Mr. Schneider, bustling in, quickly missed the absentee.

"Where is der boy?" he asked Thurlow privately, coming up to the latter's desk.

"Gone away for the day: asked leave," Thurlow replied in a whisper.

The book-keeper sniffed, and put the same question, with the same privacy and the same result, to Peters.

Then, standing before the safe and looking up and down the office, he again made enquiry—this time aloud.

"I don'd see Mr. Stanton," he said, addressing the world at large.

"He asked Mr. Edmund to let him off for the day," said Thurlow, swinging round on his stool to face his superior. Peters and Lucraft ceased their affectation of labour.

"My Gott, A'mighty Gott!" said Mr. Schneider, "der world is come to a bretty pass when der chunior clerks walk mit demselves off for not'ing. I dink I might have been gonsulted."

"He went away very mysteriously, Mr. Schneider," said Lucraft, with some malice. "Private business."

"Brivate pizness!" sniffed the book-keeper. "I nefer hear such t'ings till der son from der gofornor gome in and make der apple-pie from eferytink. I subbose *I* got to copy der letters und run to der post, isn't it? Brivate pizness!"

"I should speak to him," said Thurlow, the jackal, sententiously.

This condign proceeding seemed to commend itself to the book-keeper.

"Zerdainly, isn't it?" he said.

"After all," Lucraft added, "it wouldn't have delayed him very long to have given some sort of explanation. It would have been better manners."

"Ach! I subbose all der goot manners hass been kept for der son from der gofernor," said Mr. Schneider. "Well, come, chentlemen. I subbose we better gets to work, as we haf no brivate exguses been making. Will you get der account-current pook oud from der safe, Mr. Peters, please?"

And the storm ended in the usual teacup, the office resuming its habitual condition.

Meantime, as fast as the leisurely trains of the Suburban Railway would permit, Stanton Borlase was hurrying to meet his guardian. The events of last night had precipitated the time of their reunion. He had a good account to give of himself. He had accomplished, within a few days, Mr. Borlase's injunction to support himself without loss of capital for a year; and his bold dash into danger last night would, he felt, commend itself to his guardian as an act of decision and forethought. The apprehension with which, in spite of all his moral growth, he had looked forward to a meeting widely different in circumstances from this, had vanished. He walked with a firm and self-reliant step into what was distinguished specifically as the Hotel Entrance of the South Camberwell Hotel, really no more than a glorified public-house, and sent up his name (a communication which secured for him a great accession of deference) to Mr.

Borlase. The latter was, he learned, breakfasting on the first floor.

In those few moments, while he awaited his guardian's summons, Stanton was conscious of a certain uneasiness, a certain recrudescence of the old nervous awe. The words he had formulated for himself over and over again when, during the last few weeks, he had looked to a meeting at the Emporium—even those revised phrases which he had prepared this morning in the train, suddenly rose up before him and revealed their naked ineptitude. What, after all, would Mr. Borlase say? He perceived himself to have forgotten the salient fact that it was Mr. Borlase who had been accustomed to direct the form of every conversation. When at last he was bidden upstairs, he mounted in perturbation, unarmed, unready.

The room in which Mr. Borlase sate was not the large dining-room where (as a bill in the window of the South Camberwell Hotel confides to the public) a select ordinary at one-and-three-pence, including cheese, is daily served from half-past one to three. The local magnate had commanded a private sitting-room, and here, before a cheerful fire, he sate, pushed back from his breakfast-table, his eyes on a newspaper. No doubt he had been reading the accounts of last night's burning, for a pile of such papers lay on a corner of the sofa near him. He looked up as Stanton entered, and added this one to the rest.

Mr. Borlase had aged noticeably in this

twelvemonth. He was haggard, and his face wore an unhealthy, congested flush. His brow was damp with perspiration, his breathing irregular and painful. He clasped and unclasped his hands, holding them out to the blaze of the insufferable fire, which, even at this distance, burned Stanton's cheeks and eyes.

"Hallo, Stanton!" said the draper nervously. "So you've heard?"

"Yes, sir," Stanton replied. "I was there."

"You were there!"

"Yes. I happened to be in the neighbourhood, and I followed one of the engines."

"Well, it's a dreadful business," said Mr. Borlase. "Dreadful! Not a stick saved! I was just going round there."

"You know then—" Stanton began, and hesitated.

"You know—" he faltered again.

"Know what?" asked Mr. Borlase testily. "I know everything, of course. It's completely upset me. My head has been throbbing all the morning, and I'm so giddy I can hardly walk."

Mr. Borlase shook himself irritably, and rubbed and pinched his right leg as though it were numb from some cause.

"But do you know—" Stanton began again.

"Know what?" his guardian again peevishly interrupted.

"That there were two girls burned?"

"Yes. I know that. It's in all the papers. Miss Harris and Miss Jennings."

"Ah! I didn't know the names," said Stan-

ton. "I could only count them by hearsay. Poor creatures! It is frightful."

Mr. Borlase looked moodily in the fire. "Yes. There'll be a lot to do," he said. "I must go up to the City, as soon as I've seen the fire-station people, and interview the insurance company."

The insurance company! And this was what occupied Mr. Borlase's mind? Not those charred, those battered, nameless corpses that had possessed and tormented Stanton's mind: not the searing, paralysing responsibility of their neglected death—forgotten in the flames: not even the plight of the unclad, houseless survivors. The insurance company!

He stood, for a moment silenced by the utter uncommunion of minds in which he found himself. Turning for an instant, he faced the window, and saw from it the "leads" of an opposing house, where a row of ill-washed underclothes flapped and bellied in a gusty March wind.

"It's a bleak day," said Mr. Borlase, and Stanton saw him stretch his legs towards the grate.

"There's one thing you will like to know," Stanton said. "I ran into the shop myself, almost at the last moment, and saved the stock-book and the invoice file. I knew how necessary they would be to you."

The effect of this announcement was as astonishing as unforeseen.

Stanton had turned to the window again as he

made it, in that odd listlessness which overtakes us at moments of great tension, or when an immense detachment from one we talk with makes us suddenly aware of the impregnable privacy of man's soul. It was by a sound beside him that he was brought quickly back into the room. His guardian was standing up, his jaw fallen, his eyes aghast, the veins of his forehead standing tense and black against the livid, tight-drawn skin.

"You *what?*" he gasped.

"I saved the stock-book and——"

Mr. Borlase's amazement and passion overflowed. His teeth closed violently, revealed by his drawn lips. "You damned, ignorant little fool!" he said, expectorating the words fiercely through the clenched incisors, bared like a dog's. "You meddler! You dolt! You have ruined everything!"

Stanton stepped back a pace. Mr. Borlase had raised his fists; for a moment it almost seemed as if he were about to fall upon him, to seize his throat, to batter-in his face. But it was to his own brow that Mr. Borlase directed the blow, grinding the knuckles into his skull, his face working, his lips seeming to form words that he could not find breath to utter. At length he sank, exhausted, as in a sudden epileptiform spasm, into a chair and panted and strove for breath.

Stanton, who all this time had not sat down—had not, indeed, been invited to a chair—walked the short length of the room, amazed

and overwhelmed, knowing not what to say, failing utterly to grasp this unaccountable, unlooked-for position. On the end wall, surmounted by a set of Prince of Wales's feathers and decorated with the square and compasses, the pillars, the gavel, and the plumb-rule of the Craft, hung a gilt frame, containing a Masonic Certificate. On either side was a coloured print having allusion to the regretted sport of cock-fighting. On another wall a bloodthirsty-looking pike, stuffed and varnished, made pretence of swimming in the unreal medium of a glass case. A mahogany sideboard bore a number of inscribed tankards in electro-plate, tributary to the landlord's prowess as a sportsman. All these things Stanton looked at without familiarising himself with them: it was only afterwards, when he entered the room again, after many tumultuous hours, that he recognised them as objects impressed intimately on his perception. Only of one thing was he now conscious—that he no longer feared his guardian: that he was a man, and his own master: that whatever might be the explanation of the outburst he had just listened to, he was ready for it, and would meet it.

Mr. Borlase at length rose again, frowning, and with a face, now red and turgid, stamped in every lineament with despair.

"Where are they?" he asked. "Have you taken them home with you? Did anyone see them?"

"Certainly some one saw them," replied Stan-

ton stiffly. "They are locked up at the 'Denmark Arms.'"

"Almighty God! is there nothing I can do without being intruded upon by some incompetent?" cried Mr. Borlase. "Do you know what you have done? You have broken me. I am ruined. Oh, I am well punished for you! You blitherer, you dolt, *I* made that fire! I set the house alight! *I* risked penal servitude for this! Look here!" He tore a bundle of thin papers from his pocket. "*This* is what I prepared. *This* is what I was going to claim—for you, as well as for myself. I tell you, I was ruined. Business had gone to pot. That infernal shop of Smith & Perks down the Lane has knocked the bottom out of prices. All my investments are swallowed up. This was the only thing left. If I could have got straight with this—and I had paid my premium, God knows, dearly enough, year after year, in case of a fire that never came; they never do come when they're wanted—if I could once have got straight, I could have gone on again, with a new shop and new stock! And you—you've ruined everything! You're a pauper, as you began, and I'm one, too."

He raised his hands to heaven, and choked with wrath and reckless misery—too utterly broken and destroyed to care what crimes he revealed. Stanton turned on him with anger almost as great as his own.

"You scoundrel!" he cried. "You murderer! Do you see what you are? You are a

murderer! You have killed those girls. You shall hang!"

Mr. Borlase fell back into a chair, suddenly prostrate, white, whimpering. This transformation in the nervous, timid tool he had known—this sudden uprising of a denouncing spirit, strong in righteous horror, stemmed the tide of ire that had been heedless and uncontrollable an instant before. "Murder?" he whispered, his lips loose and shaking. "Murder?"

"It is wilful murder!" Stanton answered, with grim precision. "Murder, murder, murder! Blood-guiltiness and murder!"

"My God!" said Borlase, still in the same frightened whisper. "Hush! Don't say it. Don't speak so loud."

"So loud?" echoed Stanton. "As loud as you like. Do you think I will shield you? Never, as long as I live. I will denounce you; I will lock you up; I will hang you! Do you know that I stood by the corpses of those girls you killed—you? Ah, if you had seen them blacked to cinders, crushed, and naked, and burned out of all humanity, I think you would denounce yourself—even you!"

His lip trembled, and he turned at last his eyes from the eyes that were cast down before his and could not meet his face.

"You won't! You daren't! You never will!" Borlase said hoarsely.

"As God hears me, I will. I couldn't live if I didn't," Stanton answered. He sate down in a chair and threw back his head in a gesture of

despair. He gave a queer, coughing laugh, very low, as the thought suddenly came to him that he had never announced, would now never announce to his guardian, that he, who had been put to the door to shift for himself and prove his worth, *had* proved it, had supported himself for a year and had brought back what was lent him. Even now the recollection was but momentary: the horror of the situation he had created blotted everything out. Suddenly Mr. Borlase sat up and looked him in the face again for a long instant, his lips firm, and some of the old command in his face.

"Do it," he said. "*I am your father.* You are really my son. Your mother was a girl in my shop!"

Stanton sprang to his feet, his mouth awry, his eyes distended, the blood driven to his heart by this, the last revelation of this extraordinary morning. As he stood, transfixed, there was a knock at the door, and a waiter, in greasy evening dress, entered. At the same instant, Mr. Borlase uttered a hoarse, choking cry, and fell with a crash, full length to the floor, a little blood issuing from his nose and mouth.

CHAPTER XXIII

THICKER THAN WATER

A DAY or two later, when he made his daily call at the South Camberwell Hotel, Stanton learned that Mr. Borlase had recovered consciousness an hour earlier.

The doctor, who had just arrived, presently came to meet Stanton in the sitting-room.

"Conscious at last!" he reported, in answer to Stanton's look of inquiry.

"Yes; I have heard. What do you think of him?"

The doctor shook his head, pursing his lips.

"No hope?" asked Stanton.

"There is never absolute certainty," replied the doctor. "Your father was a man of great vitality. But he had had a severe shock. I should say, from his symptoms, that he had been ailing, without being actively aware of it, for some time. Do you know that he has been in any state of mental anxiety during the last few months?"

"I know nothing. I had not seen him for a year, until the day after the fire. From what he told me then, I should think what you say very likely."

"Coming on top of that, and of some physical degeneration of the brain—perhaps also of the

kidneys—the shock of the fire would easily account for a seizure. As to what the result may be, we must wait a little while to see. In any case, he would probably never be anything like himself again. He is very weak now. I don't want to frighten you; but, to be frank, I do not think he will live. Twenty-four hours will show. If he lives so long, he may last for many years. But to be quite candid, I think he is dying."

"Had I better see him? I don't want to do him harm."

"You can hardly do that: you would naturally wish to see him."

"Yes."

"Besides, he has asked for you. You will like to know that. The nurse says that your name was the first word he uttered."

"I will go up," said Stanton.

"Do," said the kindly, short-haired doctor, pressing his hand. "I'll wait for you. You may have a quarter of an hour. Then you must go, and I will see him again."

Stanton went up to the bedroom with a soft step. His heart was heavy with a certain self-reproach. He knew that he had done aright in that last fatal interview; yet it was not in his nature to spare himself many pangs. "It was for you as well as me," his guardian had said, trying to excuse the inexcusable. Stanton sighed heavily, sore-hearted and perplexed, as he tapped.

A nurse, in uniform, rose as he opened the door and stood behind it, her brown-leather in-

strument-wallet, with its bright armoury of forceps, pulse-glass and thermometer, swinging from her girdle. She went to the head of the bed, holding up a finger to Stanton, and smoothed the pillow.

"Do you need anything?" she asked the patient. "Here is your son."

"Let him come," said a low voice, and the nurse motioned to Stanton to enter. He held the door for her to go, and closed it behind her.

Then he went to the bed and sate on the chair beside it. Worn and shattered, Borlase turned a head languid with weakness towards him, and withdrew a hand from the bedclothes. His voice was feeble and husky, as much unlike the old voice of command as his words were unlike the old words of censure and admonition. "My boy!"

Stanton's eyes filled, and a sob choked in his throat as he took the wasted hand.

"How are you, sir?" he asked.

"Call me father."

"Father!"

Stanton's tears flowed. He bent and kissed him.

Mr. Borlase pressed the hand he still kept, and a smile passed over his lips and left them pale and relaxed, a little contorted even, by the sick brain.

"How do you feel?" Stanton asked.

Mr. Borlase shook his head.

"I am ended," he said.

"I hope not," said Stanton. With all his de-

testation of the man's crime, the sense of blood-kinship tore at his heart. Mr. Borlase sighed. "No. I'm done for, my son," he said. "And I deserve it. And it's better so."

Stanton could find nothing to say. But once again he gave the name he had been asked for. "Father!"

"Not much like a father," said the dying man, with a certain bitterness. "Not like a father, Stanton. But I cared for you, old fellow. You must take things over. Everything is left to you. You must manage for yourself: you must keep things going."

"Don't worry about me, father," Stanton answered gently. "I shall do."

"There's money in the bank, Stanton. Grimes, the manager, will let you have what you need, until you can prove the will. He knows you, you know."

"Yes, father."

"There will be a lot to do. Are you in employment?"

"Yes; but my master is very kind. I can have all the time I need. I have done what I could for the girls. You know everything was burned. They ran out in their nightgowns, and I had to have some things sent in for them before they could leave their rooms. That was right, wasn't it?"

"Yes, yes; quite right." The weary face of the draper took on a little light. Even his sunken eyes, with their yellow, congested conjunctivæ, brightened a little. "You took your

place as my son," he said. "You knew what to do! That's good." He held out his hand again. "I'm glad you knew what to do, my son. I'm glad I lived to see you a man."

Stanton was profoundly moved. Perhaps, even now— And yet! But the voice broke in again upon his troublous thoughts.

"I am very tired," said Mr. Borlase. He turned on the pillow, closing his eyes. "But don't go," he said. "I can hear you. Stay with me. It won't be very long."

"I hope it will be for many years yet," Stanton answered.

Mr. Borlase again shook his head. "No. I wish it could," he said. "I would like to—to alter some things. I would give—I'd give—" His voice weakened, and still holding Stanton's hand, he slept.

His son, broken down and heart-wrung by these manifestations—so unknown, so unlooked-for—bent his brow to the pillow and sate long without conscious thought. Certainly the insufferable problems that must presently rend and tear his understanding, if his father actually survived, were unreached, unthought-of, utterly absent as yet. All that was present with him was the softening bewilderment of this unlooked-for tenderness. Never before had his mind taken hold of the thought that in all the years since Mrs. Borlase, his foster-mother, died, no one had loved him! He felt, on a sudden, very lonely. This his father, that had been dead, was for an instant alive again; had been lost, and was found! It was more true, indeed,

that the father had never lived, for him, until now, when the stern, brutal taskmaster of his boyhood and youth had now torn aside the veil of repressed parenthood!

And but for an instant! For, in his heart, Stanton recognised that his father was dying. The full, stertorous breathing of the first seizure had given place to the debile inspiration of utter exhaustion. There was no life left, but the life that was slipping, as he sate, through his hand.

When the silent nurse reëntered, Stanton was still in the same position.

A letter from the sympathising doctor at breakfast-time next day told Stanton that his father never woke again, but had passed away, without struggle or pain, in the night. The doctor added that the esteem and regard in which Mr. Borlase had been held, both as an employer and as a public man, could not be unknown to his adopted son, and must be a great comfort to Stanton's bereavement. Neither by the doctor, nor by anyone else in the Suburb, was their real relationship surmised.

Stanton, with the letter before him, sate long at his untasted breakfast, his heart a-chill with unenvisaged sorrow. Everything in his recent life seemed, on a sudden, remote and irrelevant. The office, his work and all the daily routine that he had been accustomed to and liked seemed like things in a dream—things with which he had no personal concern. In a few moments he must rouse himself to go back to them for a while, if only to obtain fresh leave

of absence for the other duties which awaited him—the arrangement of the funeral, the winding-up of the estate, the complex, unrealised duties of executorship. And, these things accomplished, he must return to Douglas, Wilkinson & Spender's, he supposed. But how little he seemed to be concerned with that life! Yesterday, as he worked hard and late to keep his work in order, and avoid losing touch with things he had commenced and did not wish to see lapsing, he seemed to have an object in life there. His work interested and absorbed him: it *was* his life. This morning, languid and oppressed, he could not bring himself to care whether his work got confused and mangled or not; some one else must attend to it; his mind refused to go back to it; it had ceased, for the moment, to concern him.

Indeed, nothing seemed to matter. It was not mere grief that he was overwhelmed by—only torpor and indolence of spirit. As grief, the thing had not defined itself: the shock had been too great, too prostrating. His eyes were fixed before him, seeing nothing of what was there; his mind a blank weariness, unconscious of time or hunger. Suddenly he roused himself and changed his posture abruptly as he remembered that the thing he had been saving up all these weeks to say to his guardian would now never be said at all. His father was dead, and had died un comforted by it.

He pushed his plate aside to make a place on the table where he could rest his elbow, and covered his eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV

A MAN

SUMMER weather came late that year (who expects punctuality of any season but the winter?), and it was nearly three months after his father's death that Stanton, with the Chippendales, went up the river for their first Saturday afternoon. In Richmond Park the trees still wore the fair, rain-washed light-greenery of their spring dress. A little tired with the brisk pull on the tide from Hammersmith, they walked on the terraces, looking down on the remote steel-grey curve of the Thames. The sky was excellently blue, and crossed by white masses of cumulative cloud. From the river there wavered up to them a few thin sounds—a voice raised in laughter, the rattle of a pair of sculls thrown noisily into a mooring boat. But for the most part, save for the twittering of birds, and here and there the chirrup of a cricket in the grass, the place was very quiet. Few people were walking in the park, and Chippendale's deep, rather musical voice was lowered to the quietude which the silence invited.

Stanton had seen little or nothing of his friends during the past weeks. Mr. Douglas, to whom alone he told his circumstances, had been indulgent and generous. Stanton had all

the liberty he needed for the winding-up of the estate, and his employer gave him help and experienced counsel in some difficulties which Stanton carried to him. Schneider and the clerks treated him with a half-resentful aloofness: he had not thought proper to take them into his confidence; well, his confidence was not wanted. (The inquisitive Schneider wanted it very much: he hated anything which happened without his being told of it.) Stanton now did work which was not directly under anyone's control but Edmund's and Mr. Douglas's; he was employed more and more on the technical rather than the clerical side of the business. The others, without being able to complain, even to each other, of his advancement, somehow felt that he had withdrawn from their fraternity. His intellectual superiority to themselves they vaguely felt, vaguely resented; what they did not feel, and indeed had hardly within them the materials for being appreciative of, was the fact that much of Stanton's advancement was due to his conscientiousness. He had what they lacked, the old-fashioned Englishman's absolute devotion to his work. To do what he was paid for, thoroughly, at no matter what cost to himself, was become an instinct with him. All they knew was that he somehow excelled them: and they hated him for it. But the growth of his character, which the responsibilities of executorship had a great influence in consolidating and completing, gave him an independent spirit, which earned appreciation and respect. He had

lived; he had felt in his soul the imminent momentousness of existence and had looked on the face of the dead. He was in all senses a man, full grown, relying upon himself and on his own capacity, needing countenance and support from that capacity alone, and firm and self-reliant in all he did. He had come to be regarded as an important member of the staff, and no one ventured any longer to criticise him.

There was much to be done at South Camberwell—accounts to be examined and paid, people to be seen and looked after. Stanton's evenings were fully occupied, and he had very little time to spend with the Chippendales, still, except for Mr. and Mrs. Wicksted, his only friends.

Wicksted, by what appeared to him great good fortune, found speedy employment in one of the wholesale houses that Mr. Borlase had done business with. His services had been employed by Stanton in the closing up of the accounts—at a salary, be it said, considerably in excess of what he had received from the shop. On the basis of this salary the wholesale house “took him over,” hardly able to believe in his own good luck. He left the Southern Suburb for a semi-detached house of eight small rooms near Lordship Lane, erected in the worst taste of a local builder, and intimate with the domestic sounds of its abutting neighbour.

By degrees, in South Camberwell, we reconciled ourselves to the permanent disappearance of our favourite shop. Not a vestige of it remained. The glory of the departed Borlase van-

ished with it. Even the testimonial, which had hung, gilt-framed, on the wall of the draper's drawing-room bearing witness to "your Private Virtues and Illustrious Public Services," as appreciated by "the Ratepayers of this Parish," had perished in the flames. So had Mr. Borlase's portrait (in oils) referred to in that illuminated document. Mr. Borlase's places as Churchwarden, as Vestryman and as Guardian of the Poor were filled up, and (so short is public memory) he was, in a few months forgotten, save by a few of his older fellow-officials, who wagged their heads over the more outrageous innovations of a democratising County Council, and opined that "Borlase wouldn't have stood this kind of thing." But they, the living, were as powerless as Borlase, the dead, to stem the current.

This afternoon at Richmond gave Stanton his first hours with the Chippendales. He had told Mary, in the office, more than he had told any of the other clerks—that his father, from whom he had been separated for a long time, had suddenly died, and that he, Stanton, had had the estate to administer.

She knew of the fire—Peters's account of it and of Stanton's strange behaviour, had, somehow, percolated to her, without being very clearly understood. He spoke of it now.

"You know I have a story to tell you two," he said, as they sate at last on a bench overlooking the stream. "There have been so many things to do that I haven't had the chance be-

fore, and that is why, partly, I got you to come up the river to-day. It's a pretty long story; but I feel as if I'd been rather mysterious; and, anyway, you're my friends—my only friends almost—and I feel as though you had a right to know things."

"That's all right, old man," said Chippendale. "We know you've been busy, and we didn't worry you to come and see us so long as you had work to call you."

"Well, it isn't just that," said Stanton. "I'm not apologising for staying away, because I knew you'd both understand. What I want you to know is all about me. I've kept my own counsel since I've known you because I had to. I'd given my word. But now that I'm a free agent, I want to be candid. You remember that I came to Douglas's from a shop in South Camberwell—Borlase's?"

Mary nodded.

"Well, we've often talked about that shop and its ways. I didn't like them when I was in it. I have hated them since I have known you two."

"Why since?" asked Chippendale, packing tobacco hard into a large pipe.

"You've shown me the hatefulness and iniquity of it. Well, that shop belonged to my father, Mr. Borlase. I didn't know that he was my father until just before he died. When I left school he took me into the shop for a little while, but eventually he gave me twenty pounds, and told me to go and try if I could make my own

way in the world for a year. He said I needed to do that—that I must make a man of myself.”

“He had wisdom, your father,” Chippendale commented.

“Yes. I see it now. But it seemed hard then. I had always been told I was an adopted child. I am—” Stanton hesitated. “Mrs. Borlase wasn’t my mother,” he said, looking before him into the trees for a moment before he turned his eyes to Mary’s face.

“I didn’t know anything when I left the shop,” he went on. “I hardly realised that it was a shop kept on wrong principles. I wasn’t a man. Going out to shift for myself did, in a way, make a man of me—that and your friendship, you two.” His voice broke a little, and he looked from one to another.

“It’s a disagreeable story, you see,” he continued. “I was brought up on money that wasn’t made in a way that I can approve of. I am, in a way, indebted to it; but it hurts me to think that I, in a way, had your friendship on false pretences. You hate the shop and its ways: and I had lived on the profits of those ways.”

“Oh, nonsense!” said Chippendale. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“We liked you for yourself,” Mary added. “The shop doesn’t make any difference. I can understand you not caring to talk——”

“No, it wasn’t that,” said Stanton. “I would have told you, but my father made it a condition that I wasn’t to use his name, and I considered that as a pledge.”

"Quite right," Chippendale nodded.

"Wait a moment," Mary interposed. "Mr. Borlase treated you as an adopted son. But he was kind to you—you were fond of him, weren't you?"

Stanton hesitated. "Mrs. Borlase—she died when I was at school—was very, very kind to me," he said. "She was the only person who ever seemed to care for me. My father was very stern to everyone. He wouldn't let me be fond of him. And yet——"

"And yet?" Mary helped him.

"And yet he *was* fond of me," Stanton answered. "At the last he showed it. Only at the last! When he put me to the door, last year, it was in kindness, and when I saw him again, just before his death, he was very kind and fatherly."

He stopped, and sate for some minutes in thought. "And he never knew!" he exclaimed at last, rather bitterly.

"Never knew what?" Mary asked.

"Never knew that I had come to—to——"

"To love him," she said softly.

"Yes, in a way, to love him—though, in a way, it was I who killed him!"

"You killed him!" Chippendale exclaimed.

"No, no; this is morbid," Mary said. "He's reproaching himself for some idea, Will."

"No, I'm not," Stanton replied firmly. "I don't reproach myself. I did right. I had to do what I did. I should be a sentimental fool if I reproached myself."

"I don't understand you," said Chippendale, to whom all this appeared, as Mary had called it, morbid and self-conscious.

"It isn't very easy to explain. My father is dead, and he did what he did for *me*," Stanton said. "He wasn't a good man, but he cared for me, and I hate myself, in a way, when I think of that. Yet it wasn't my fault. My father had got into difficulties. He burned the shop down for the sake of the insurance; and there were girls in it who were killed. I was at the fire, and I saved some of the books. I didn't know until afterwards that all the girls were not out."

"Yes, yes. I heard of that. You risked your life," Mary said.

"Yes, it seems I did, though I didn't think there was any danger," Stanton replied. "The firemen were inside. But you see, just those books would have shown the true value of the goods that were burned. They were over-insured. I went to my father—I didn't know he was my father then—next day, and told him what I had done. He cursed me for it! He told me I had ruined him, that he had set the place on fire himself, on purpose to burn those books along with the stock. I told him that he had killed two girls—called him a murderer. I said I would denounce him. Then he told me. 'You are my son,' he said, and fell down in a fit, from which he never recovered. I only saw him once afterwards, just before he died. He forgave me. He had never spoken to me as he

spoke then—I felt like a murderer, myself, for a moment. Yet what else could I have done?”

“You couldn’t have done anything else,” said Mary gently. “You played the man. You did right. You haven’t anything to reproach yourself with.”

“Yes, you were right,” said Chippendale.

“Then, of course,” said Stanton, “there was everything to wind-up. The money in the bank just about paid the trade debts. The stocks and shares that he had open had to be sold to liquidate the stockbroker’s account; and they produced nothing. Of course I couldn’t claim the insurance.”

“Did they know it was an incendiary fire?” asked Chippendale.

“No; no one ever knew. I simply didn’t claim the insurance from the companies. I didn’t go near them. You can see I couldn’t take the money; and as there was just about enough, with a little I had saved, to pay the creditors, there was no one who could ask any questions.”

Chippendale nodded gravely.

“You see, as I said, it isn’t a pleasant story,” Stanton concluded.

“Not altogether,” said Mary; “but there is nothing in it that you have to be ashamed of.”

The three sate silent for some minutes. Presently Chippendale, who never remained still long without difficulty and a sensation as of cramp in the legs, stretched those members warningly and got up. The others did not

move. The sculptor strolled away down the slope and left them, still silent.

At last they turned to each other, and Stanton looked into his companion's face. His feeling for her was a lad's admiring reverence for the first woman, older than himself, whom he had known at all intimately since boyhood. Something in his grey eyes, as they met her brown ones, made her sigh, and she rose, looking towards her brother.

"You decided not to change your name again, then?" she said, gently.

"No," he replied. "I shall go on calling myself Stanton. It's the only name, after all, that I have a right to—my mother's. It's the only name I could offer to a woman, if I should ever ask a woman to share it."

"Yes, and it's the name in which you have made a man of yourself," she replied.

They walked to join Chippendale.

A steep place, a little way down, near the terrace of the Star and Garter, caused her to stumble. Stanton held out a hand to steady her, and she put her own hand into it, leaning for a moment upon him. She sighed again as their eyes met, his with so much worship in them—hers with a certain sadness, because of what she saw there.

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